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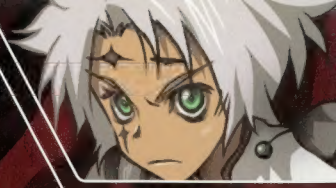

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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

67

Nintendo has officially gone off the reservation

Leading up to the new E3 "business summit," we've been attending various Gamer's Days to sample the goods we once braved a week in LA to ponder. Not only is this a more efficient way to see what each publisher has in store, but it's also more informative, given we get to spend quality time with each game, producer, and so on. Sony, Sega, Ubisoft, Namco Bandai, EA, Eidos, Activision…everything seemed to be going as planned until we landed at Nintendo. Eager to see Mario Galaxy, Battalion Wars 2, Project H.A.M.M.E.R., and Super Smash Bros. Brawl, we were met with everything but. In fact, outside of confirming Galaxy and Brawl, no other games were even mentioned, and aside from Corruption, not a single new title was on display. What followed was like a trip to the Twilight Zone as Reggie took the stage to declare Nintendo's master plan.

Was he concerned that the machine has become the mecca for sub-par ports in its first year? No. Or that as third parties begin to develop dedicated PS3 and Xbox 360 games, even those ports will soon dry up? Uh…no. Did he announce any exciting new titles or at least explain where all the old ones were? Negative.

No, what Reggie explained is that it's your mom they want; that games like Nintendogs would pave the way for generations of Wii gamers to come. Nintendo's focus will now shift from the core gamer to the casual to *very* casual gamer. He concluded the diatribe on their new demographic by throwing us casual gamers a bone, albeit a tiny gnawed-on chicken wing, by proclaiming that Nintendo would never forget who got them here—that would be you and me—but that doesn't change the fact that in one calendar year Nintendo has not announced a single first-party game for the real-gamer demographic. They can't even be troubled to crank out a localization of Fire Emblem. Wow…thanks Redge: I can stop dreaming about Heavenly Sword and Fable 2 now!

While the Wii definitely has some great games left on the schedule (the *same* ones) along with a trickle of third-party exclusives, the future of the Wii does not revolve around us gamers. That ship has sailed. While we dust ourselves off and head for higher HD ground, yeah, it hurts a bit, but I wonder if it will actually work? I don't blame Nintendo for stepping outside of the 360/PS3 arena and doing something different, but I don't understand why they have to ditch us to do it. It makes sense to cash in on the virtual pet/brain twister/pedestrian sports craze (I guess), given their hardware and unique controller (not to mention that they're also sitting on the world's hottest hardware in the DS). I just wonder if the casual gamer can support a console? I was also really looking forward to Wii exclusives designed to the system's considerable strengths. Metroid Prime 3 Corruption really shows the potential of the machine, as do games like No More Heroes, NiGHTS, Red Steel 2, and Zack & Wiki.

In the meantime we'll of course relish every Mario, Metroid, and Zelda as few and far between as they may be, but for now let's take a moment of silence to remember the Nintendo of old...We never did get a Kid Icarus.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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playback

July 2007

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Are you a God?

The May issue of Play had a lot of angst about the future of Sony's Playstation 3. Here's my take on this topic.

Obviously, both Nintendo and Sony made decisions based on resources available. Nintendo looked at the market and decided on a low-cost innovative solution, almost certainly because that solution fit their management cap on technology development. Sony looked at where games were going to be in 5 to 10 years or more, and decided, based on their technology predictions, that the big winner was going to be the company that met certain major technology goals in that time frame. Sony had more resources and were willing to wait longer for the payoff. That much is fairly obvious, but there's another point to this that is often overlooked. The IBM Cell processor used in the Sony PlayStation 3 has design features that the computer industry as a whole is converging on in their advanced designs. Basically, it's a break from the idea of the central processor that manages everything to the idea of separate processors that offload the CPU. It's like an office in which the manager is the director, but each worker is responsible for individual tasks.

As has been reported in Play, the power of the multi-core Playstation 3 engine has a huge downside. This engine breaks the long-held objective of hardware design, which in theory isolates the programmer from hardware changes. This means that it now takes far longer to program a game, further pushing schedules of Playstation 3 games into the future.

This begs the question: with so many downsides, why would Sony take such enormous risks just to make games a little better? I think I know the answer to that one.

The answer lies in Sony's vision of the future of games. In the beginning games were very linear. A single player was given a path with puzzles, obstacles and objectives. Finishing the game involved solving all the puzzles and overcoming all the obstacles. But as time passed, games became nonlinear, worse, multiplayer games were introduced. It must have dawned on Sony where all this was going.

Sony's vision is to be no less than God. God doesn't create empires and wars and all the rest. God creates the universe for man's evil ways. That's obviously what the public wants — a place to carry out all their dark desires with no consequences in a universe that requires massive parallel processing, the kind the Playstation 3 has, a place where the players create the game from the raw materials that God supplies. What's 600 smackeroos when heaven on Earth awaits?

And Sony looked out upon the waters and saw that it was good.

Henry

2 Cents...and change

Having been a gamer for nearly thirty years, it's amazing to see how games have evolved, as have the magazines that represent them. Although some adhere to the attitude popularized by the Playstation Generation, Play has managed to rise above that. You take gaming seriously and treat it as a legitimate pastime, providing information and entertainment that we "mature" readers can appreciate.

In response to Brian's letter (May, 2007), there is an underlying sense that this industry tends to parody itself, and unlike movies and art, video games identify more with comic books, which may be a part of the problem. Video games, in my opinion, are the evolution of the entertainment industry as an interactive medium limited only by imagination, yet can't or is not allowed to grow beyond its roots. Play magazine treats this industry, our hobby, with the respect that it deserves, why can't the industry do the same for itself?

Mike

Vision quest

I read an interview with Randy Pitchford from GearBox software, in which he stated that all sci-fi games are basically stolen from the movie Aliens. It confirmed what I suspected all along, that the vast majority of developers, especially American, lack any real creative vision. It shouldn't be that hard to come up with a theme or ideas that are different and original.

Maybe, if these companies start employing people who do have an artistic vision instead of focusing all their efforts on physics and dull realism, we wouldn't have a glut of games we've seen too many times before. Part of the problem may reside in the casual gaming market, in that many games that do offer something different are often overlooked for a dumbed down product they're familiar with.

If the industry continues to focus on those people as well, it's their fault that a game like Okami is considered a failure when it could have been a success if they weren't spreading the industry too thin. Obviously, this is a business. But it's been shown in other areas of entertainment that, when you focus too much on the business side, you end up with a ton of mediocre product that may appeal to people at first, but eventually show them tuning out in hopes for something better.

That's why bands like Led Zeppelin will be around forever, while boy bands fall by the wayside. Hopefully the videogame industry will stop offering up the equivalent of the Back Street Boys before it's too late.

Erin H.

Seeing Red

THANK YOU for your coverage of Red Star! I just got the game in yesterday from Amazon after its oh-my-god-it-will-never-ever-ever-come-out release delays, and it is AWESOME! Especially for the price. ... I need to use just a little bit more capital letters, so DAVE YOU ARE THE MAN!!

kthxbye

-Two years of pushing and no play quote on the box. They did send us one copy though.

> **"What's 600 smackeroos when heaven on Earth awaits?"**

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Riddick returns to Butcher Bay and beyond...

The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena

How do you make an amazing first-person adventure like The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay even better? You start by overhauling the engine for Xbox 360 and PS3. Then you add in multiplayer, which was missing from the original Xbox release. You make sure talented developer Starbreeze is involved in the redesign, and while you're at it, why not just add more game to extend the story even more? The entire package will be called The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, set to release later this year.

The reference to Dark Athena in the title points to the name of a mercenary ship, run by a belligerent crew who bring a new set of conflict to the core of the original game. There's not much detail on just how far Starbreeze will go with reworking the foundation of Escape from Butcher Bay, but don't expect a basic boost to HD (which we'd take anyways...). A statement by Vin Diesel's Tigon Studios head of production, Cos Lazouras gives a hint. "The Riddick universe is incredibly rich source material for creating on-going stories and games. This next chronicle will take us to new, dark corners of that universe, which when combined with Starbreeze's fantastic next-gen technology, will deliver the compelling player experience gamers have come to expect of Riddick."

> "The Riddick universe is incredibly rich source material for creating on-going stories and games..."
>
> Tigon Studios head of production, Cos Lazouras

Tapping Tomb Raider

Video shorts

Lara is over a decade old, so to commemorate the indomitable tomb raider's storied history, GameTap decided to gather a group of respected artists and writers to put their own unique spin on Miss Croft's world. A collection of 10 animated, 5-minute shorts were created as a result, called Re/Visioned—each dramatically different and flavored by the distinct visions of the talent involved. Peter Chung, whose version of Lara is represented here on the page, kicked off the series with his trippy sci-fi influences. Called *Keys to the Kingdom*, the first three episodes were written, directed and designed by Chung, who's known for creating *Aeon Flux* and *Martriculated* from the *Animatrix*.

In addition to the animated shorts, you can also check out GameTap's Tomb Raider retrospective—an 8-part series that takes a look at the games, culture, and talent that sparked it all.

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NARUTO

Rise of a Ninja

The anime juggernaut is about to become a gaming legend

words Heather Campbell

"I am very lucky, because on this game, I only have people who really wanted to work on it." - Sebastien Puel producer Naruto

I'm standing on the edge of a golden-capped building, staring out at the vast and familiar city before me. My spiked blond hair rustles in the early afternoon wind, and for a moment, I just take in the outline of the Hidden Village of the Leaf. Above the cluttered rooftops, beyond the thin black lines of telephone wires and the marshmallow forms of hulking water-drums, a mountain in the distance stands as a proud reminder of this city's heritage. Four Hokage are carved into its ginger face, and their determined gaze lends significance to every action in the city below.

This isn't just some random ninja village. This is Konoha. And I am Naruto. Believe it.

As a player, this is as close as I can get to existing within the world of the popular manga and anime series. The music that pipes out of the television is the same charming bamboo-flute songs that I've grown to love over the last few years. These are the melodies of the anime, the color palate of the anime, the character design of the anime. Even as I stand on the lip of this building, I can tell that the structures in the distance are all where they are supposed to be. I've never even thought about the relationship between places in Konoha before, but as I look out, I instinctively know where to search for my favorite locations. Yep, this is it.

In HD, I can tell that what I'm looking at is a video-game. But on a standard resolution screen, would I be able to see a difference? No way. So, before I begin to move, the illusion is perfect. There's Naruto, there's Konoha. Every action I take from this moment forward will chip away at the mirage. The question is, by how much?

See, the dream at the back of the mind of all video gamers is the Holodeck. The Holodeck, a Star Trek invention, is a limitless interactive environment—photorealistic and tangible. The difference between the Holodeck and the outside world is simply one of boundaries; you're in the outside world when you exit the Holodeck, and you're in the Holodeck when you enter. The rest is interchangeable.

As the presence of video games grows more ubiquitous, this Holodeck fantasy rises up into our gamers' consciousness more and more often. We don't just want interactivity – we want total immersion. We want to exist in these places of fiction. As we go about our real-world days, watching television, anime, and film, we think, "Man, wouldn't it be awesome to be there?"

Unfortunately, this immersion eludes us. We get closer each time we leap into a new generation of hardware, but it's still going to be a long while before we can lean over in Madden and inspect each blade of grass: it'll certainly be longer still before every book on a shelf in Grand Theft Auto is fully readable.

It may not be that long before we can enter an anime, though. With less detail than the real world, all one needs to do to re-create an animated place is be consistent, faithful, and diligent. To run through a perfect Konoha is far less unlikely than to run through a photorealistic, convincing downtown San Francisco. And Ubisoft Montreal has proven that we can run through Konoha right now, on the Xbox 360. At the moment when the Naruto: Rise of a Ninja demo begins, you're there, standing in Konoha, the cel-shaded back of Naruto completely indistinguishable from the anime.

Beside me sits producer Sebastien Puel. He's a combination of proud father and giddy child. Still delighted with his creation, he describes Naruto: Rise of a Ninja in a dizzying mix of PR-standard phrases and off-the-cuff enthusiasm.

"I am very lucky, because on this game, I only have people who really wanted to work on it," says Puel, in an effusive French accent. "Of the 92 people working on Naruto, 95% of them called me, or came up to my desk and said…"

Puel leans in and whispers:

…I want to work on Naruto."

This is a western game, made by fans, for fans. By the time it ships, almost two years will have gone into its development. It's obviously licensed, but the energy around the studio feels like a homegrown project. Everyone wants to get the details right, and not just to satisfy Viz. They want to satisfy themselves.

So, I edge Naruto forward. His gait is cakey, pleasing, and extraordinarily well-animated. Khai Nguyen, the animation director, has been obsessive. There's a frame for every degree of movement. One of my pet peeves in video games is when a character has a "run" motion and a "walk" motion, but nothing to transition between the two. Whether Naruto is walking, running, or dashing, there's animation to describe every step. Because the game is being designed from the ground up for the Xbox 360, the development team knows exactly what their margins are.

Puel pipes in. "It's a beautiful, gorgeous universe, and to show it, we wanted to have platforming as well. Every surface is climbable." This is the work of the Jade engine. And although not every building can be entered, landmark buildings are explorable. In the final build, Puel grins, you'll be able to hang out in Naruto's

This is platforming on a whole new level.

house.

At this point, I haven't even begun playing the game. I'm just at the start of something fantastic. I leap off the top of this Konoha apartment, and land with a successful hop in the street below. Time to run around a bit. How much of the Naruto world is here? Puel explains, "This is the real Naruto story. We wanted to start at the beginning, episode 1, and will end with the Gaara fight, episode 80. This is a real, complete story arc."

I know that Konoha gets pretty banged up during these episodes. Am I going to see that in the game, I ask? Puel nods. "Of course." And though Konoha is the player's core environment, the game isn't limited to running around Naruto's home town. The Death Forest will be a playable, explorable place, as Naruto's team tries to retrieve scrolls for the Chunin exam. The bridge where Team Kakashi fights Haku and Zabuza? Yep. Think of a place in those first 80 episodes, and Puel's team has thought of it, too.

Back to the game. I love walking, but I want to leap across buildings and race with my arms behind me, so I hold down a trigger to sprint. Naruto at top speed controls like a vehicle—his momentum stretches his turns into sweeping circles, and his stops skid across dirt and grass with satisfying energy. I scream through the city, and crash into walls before getting the hang of going so fast. Bumping into objects disorients Naruto; he spins in place and his eyes go blank. Like the show, Naruto is part action and part comedy—a difficult balance that the team seems to have captured. Soon, I'm running through Konoha without too many collisions. And then, with none at all.

Now, at first, I'm disappointed by the seemingly empty streets of Konoha. Few NPCs wander around, and the village looks a little lonely. Turns out, Puel's designers would rather have every NPC be interactive than clutter the streets with mute mannequins. Ten NPCs on screen at any given time was the goal, and each of them has feelings towards Naruto in one way or another.

Do you use your resources to have a huge crowd, or you do you decide that you'd like to be able to interact with anyone? For Puel, the answer is obvious.

Talking to people is a big part of Rise of a Ninja. Beyond running and platforming, the title has some RPG-inspired sequences. "I don't really like the term RPG; we think of it more as Character Growth. Naruto starts as a drop-out, and he becomes a better Ninja. And we really wanted to convey this through RPG mechanics."

So far, I haven't seen any numbers, so I don't follow what Puel means. I run to Kakashi, intent on learning a new technique. Before he'll teach me, I need to complete another quest—tracking down village delinquent Konohamaru. I can also do a ramen-delivery run, if I'd like. Everything in this demo is a bit of a placeholder, but I'm getting a sense of how the systems work. Once Naruto has multiple quests available to him, he can choose which one to engage.

Now, rather than the complicated input of a hardcore RPG, quest interaction in

Naruto is relegated to a single button. If you need clues about the whereabouts of Konohamaru, select that quest in your quest menu, and then every interaction with NPCs is relevant to this quest. I love the menus; they're rendered in graphic Shonen-Jump style. Even though Puel says, "These are very work-in-progress," I can't imagine the menus looking more authentic.

Running up to NPCs, I ask for help. Some villagers point you in the right direction, and some ignore you. Naruto's not a very popular kid. But finding Konohamaru increases my village status, and ups my chakra a little. As a metaphor for your self-confidence, it makes sense that more chakra is available to Naruto as he gets recognition in Konoha. "We really wanted to tell the story of Naruto, from Naruto's point of view. That was the fantasy from the beginning," says Puel.

With my chakra increased, it's time for some training with Kakashi.

"One of the things we were really focused on reproducing were the hand-seals," says Puel. Fighting sequences in the Naruto anime and manga are punctuated by chakra-linked hand gestures. Ubisoft Montreal has used the dual directional pads to try and re-create the impression of forming these seals. In quick succession, the player presses several different directions on the joypad to activate a special move, sorta like conducting with The Wind Waker's baton, but with greater rapidity. The effect gives me goosebumps. I'm doing thumb-seals.

Before Naruto can run up a wall, he has to focus chakra in his feet. Form the seals, dash up the wall; soon the move is instinctive. Later, when I'm shown Naruto's ability to walk across water, the chakra balance becomes more delicate. Sticking to a tree is one thing. Balancing on a fluid surface should be more difficult, and it is. Keeping your chakra gauge in-between two levels, you direct Naruto while carefully tapping a button to keep the energy flowing. It's difficult enough that a developer crashes into the river while showing off the concept. He's embarrassed, but I'm ecstatic. So much of the anime is about Naruto's diligence when training; it's going to take some player attentiveness to get the hang of some of the more complicated moves. A good work ethic goes a long way, says the Naruto story; it's nice to see the game following suit.

Sitting at Ubisoft, playing a game about a ninja who can walk on walls, it's hard not to think of Prince of Persia. Puel balks a bit. "Sure, he can climb, and run along walls, and such, but because of the emphasis on character, the action feels very different."

Now I'm leaping over awnings, and forming my hand-seals when I want to run up a wall. It's refreshing—and more importantly, fun.

Throwing off these seals when exploring is one thing, but in combat, the parallels to the anime are clearer. Taking a time out to form a hand-seal during a fight lends the anime a very specific beat. Rise of a Ninja is a bit RPG, a bit sandbox, action, platforming, and of course, a heavy dose of fighting game. Puel's philosophy is that it's "not possible to have a good manga game without action." The fighting engine is solid and physical. It's not an afterthought to an action-RPG game; it's a core mechanic. And those hand-seals are integral. The final game will have at least ten fighters to choose from. In the demo, I take on Neji, the elitist Byakugan user from the Chunin arc.

Fighting with Neji, Naruto throws in a few close-range attacks before leaping to the other side of the arena. Up/up, towards/away, I focus chakra as Neji dashes across the playing field. Desperate to form seals before my opponent lands a punch, I have to abandon my strategy when my fellow ninja gets too close. Without taking the control away from the player, the seal-forming has given the game's battles an anime's pace. Like a time signature, fighting in the Naruto world always moves at a certain speed, and Ubisoft has accomplished this by punctuating the battles with hand-seals.

Land a successful special move, and the fight launches into an interactive fight/cut scene. Neji's using his 64-strike attack against me. I've got a few chances to defend, by pressing certain buttons in active-time-event style (like Shenmue, Resident Evil 4, or God of War). The fighting is responsive and delightful. Good thing it'll be the online feature available on Xbox Live, with online ranking. With twelve basic moves, plus context-sensitive variations on these moves, special moves, and hand-seals, the fights will get more complicated based on the skill of the players involved. "I don't want to brag," says a gently bragging Puel, "but in terms of quantitative moves, we are

"As a metaphor for your self-confidence, it makes sense that more chakra is available to Naruto as he gets recognition in Konoha."

LOW MESH WIRE | HIGH MESH | LOW MESH + TEXTURES | HIGH MESH + COLOR

competing with the best fighters." The fight ends. I've lost this one to Neji. But after I fight again, I can take him.

To get back to Konoha, I'll have to journey through the forest. Each environment in the game will be connected by marshes or forests, and the ninjas of the Naruto world travel by leaping from tree to tree. If you've seen the Naruto 360 trailer, you're probably floored, as I was, by the visual accuracy of these sequences. And you've probably wondered how the tree-jumping works. Before heading to Montreal, I imagined it would be clunky and difficult, like a racing game awkwardly grafted into an action title. Having seen what Puel's team was up to, I was far less worried as I sat in the office.

Indeed, as eager as I was to explore the world of Naruto, I had reserved a whole tank of enthusiasm for a satisfying dash though the forest. The best way to describe Naruto's tree-leaping sequences would be rhythm-action game without button prompts. Moving from one tree to the next is as simple as pressing "A," but the cadence and timing of your button pressing influences the speed at which you arrive at the next tree. Press too soon, and Naruto stumbles. Press too late, and you lose speed. "We wanted very, very fast action gameplay, for the journey sequences," says Puel.

In addition to timing, the player also has a choice of direction. And again, in an effort to make the game immersive, the best tree branches are not pointed out with jarring icons. Instead, lighting effects suggest which way to go. Edging Naruto towards each well-lit branch, pressing "A" with increasing swiftness, the tree-leaping reminds me a bit of *Return of the Jedi*. Trees fly at Naruto with happy alacrity, and I've got tiny seconds to choose which branch to land on. Jump fast enough, and Naruto is propelled higher into the canopy, where more pick-ups and treasures are scattered in the trees.

It works.

Even with the rudimentary animation in place, the system sails. If this game has a hard setting, the tree-leaping will be an unforgiving mini racing game. But it's never counter-intuitive; the mechanics take only a moment to get used to. Tree-jumping is crunchy.

At this point, I'd seen everything the demo had to offer. Puel takes me through the development studio, and shows off the rough outlines of future elements. The fight sequences are storyboarded in sketches and then translated into game sequences. Every battle features three-dimensional character models, indistinguishable from their anime counterparts. The lead character modeler pulls up a picture of Orochimaru, and I press my nose against the computer trying to tell the difference between the anime cel and the cel-shaded in-game model. There's no disparity. Puel adds, "Viz called us up and had to confirm that these were actually in-game pieces, and not their art sent back to them."

I'm given a quick teaser of the other game environments, and it's like looking at production stills from the anime. At some point, I have the uncomfortable thought: Why hasn't a Japanese team treated this property with this kind of obsessive respect? Then I remember that some of the best licensed action figures and tie-ins for western products are Japanese; it's about time that we gave them the same treatment in return. "Maybe we're like the good students in a class. The licensor showed a little fear at first, so we had to really work hard. And now, they're not afraid anymore." Even so, Puel had some big plans from the start. "At one point, we wanted a huge online world, where people could talk about manga inside of a manga game. Imagine talking about Naruto or Bleach or whatever inside of Konoha. Eventually we had to turn it down; we were looking at doing a Naruto MMO, which isn't what we wanted to focus on."

As amazing as the studio is, I'm distracted by the demo I'd seen only moments before. Puel seems to sense this. "Would you like to play the game again?" I nod, and we head back to the demo room. Second time through, the game is just as charming. With the volume on the television set a little higher, I can hear some basic voice work, in English. Is this going to be the only way to play the game, I ask? Rise of a Ninja is designed for western gamers, so English is likely to be the only option, but Puel offers, with a reluctant smile, "We know what the fans want."

Of course they do. They're fans themselves.

I find my way back to the highest point in Konoha, and stare out at the city some more. There's a part of me that's nervous—like I'm not playing the demo the way Ubisoft would prefer. Focused on finding scenic overlooks, I guide Naruto up and up, grinding across wires, and leaping over rooftops. But Puel doesn't press me to play any specific way. Naruto: Rise of a Ninja isn't about forcing the player into a specific mold. Everyone has their own way of the ninja. Finally, I find Naruto's balcony, and stand at the edge, looking across Konoha. Yeah, it's pretty perfect. Believe it.

Naruto: Rise of a Ninja	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Available	October, 2007

Interview

Ann Lemay, Scriptwriter
Naruto: Rise of a Ninja

play: Take a seat, sit back, relax! Let's talk about Naruto for a while! So, were you a fan of *Naruto* before this project?
Ann Lemay: Yes, in fact I campaigned to be on this project, to write for it.

How long have you been following the series?
I've been into anime on and off for a very long time now. At the time of *Slayers* and *Ranma*... I've been a fan since then. Then I dropped out for a few years, and got back with *Full Metal Alchemist*. After that, it brought me into stuff like *Bleach* and *One Piece* and *Naruto*. I fell in love with *Naruto*, I was like, "Oh my god, I have to see all of this at once!" I watched so many episodes at once.

I, too, got into *Naruto* after watching *FMA*. It was a good time to be into anime.
Yes, it was. I got into *Bleach*, too, and it slightly edges out Naruto as my top anime. I'm a big fan of *Bleach*. But Naruto is right up there, too.

Wow. I don't know how you can consider *Bleach* better than *Naruto*.
[laughing] It's different. I was never into the similarly themed anime, like *Kenshin* and all that, so to me, the whole setting is kind of new.

So, you write not only the story, but also the dialogue?
I've written every word in it, from A-Z. I write the story, the dialogue, and when the voice actors go in to record the dialogue, I try to give them as many setting cues as I can. The scenes are individually contained, but I try to put cues into them so the actors know the mood of the characters.

"Everyone has been through a childhood where at one point they're alienated, where they feel like they don't belong."

Ann Lemay, Scriptwriter, Naruto

With so many NPCs, did you have to create any original characters?
We tried to keep everything as canon as possible. It's either very specific, or very general. We didn't create any original characters.

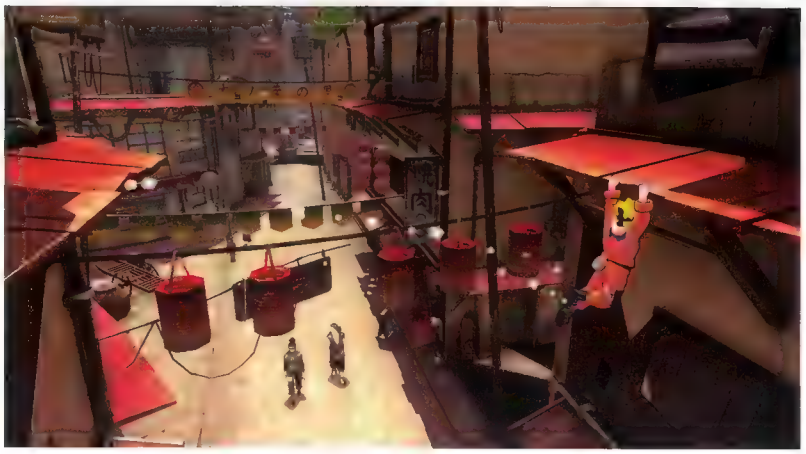
How long is your script? How long is the game?
The game is supposed to be played over 8 to 10 hours, but that's knowing the optimum route. So there's probably a lot more game playing time for someone who's just coming into the game. We cover episodes 1-80, because basically, we're making a game for the American public. And we have to play with the episodes that have been distributed. So, I had to make a script for a lot of storyline. Looking back, we were actually thinking about going from 1-135, which, at the time … I just looked at the scope of it and was like, "No." Now, especially, after all the work we've done, and the adaptation, I can safely say that 1-135 would have blown my head up. There's a lot of characters introduced in the story, and you want to take so much care introducing background and story and side characters. You have a few archetypal bad guys, who are bad for the sake of being bad, but other than that, none of the bad guys are bad to the bone. That's rare, to have villains that you're sympathetic to, regardless of what they do. So, one of the things that was hard to do was condensing all this down to the point of view of Naruto. It was a fun challenge. Well, a hair-tearing challenge at times.

So, if a lot of your job is editing this existing story, what was the most painful edit for you?
Shikamaru doesn't have the screen time that I'd want him to. He's one of my favorite characters. But we had to be ruthless.

Since you're such a big fan, would you say that this version of the story includes your personal flavor?
My job, as a writer for this project, was to do something for Viz—that Viz would be happy about. Usually, when you submit your work, with a license, you have a lot of back-and-forth between the licensor and the development team. But after the initial review, we actually had very little of that. I'm sure that there's something of myself in the story, but my goal was to make Viz happy.

Not that romance is a huge element of the Naruto story, but how much of the love triangle remains in the game?
It's there, it's there. It's a comedy, and it's one of the first things we targeted, saying, "Okay, this is what makes this very funny." Naruto's always going after Sakura and Sakura's always going after Sasuke and Sasuke can't stand either of them. We actually had a scene. I don't know how much of this I'm supposed to spoil or not. There are moments where Sakura begins to notice Naruto, and it's the same time when the battles between Sasuke and Naruto begin to tip, in the Forest of Death. The romance is there.

Speaking of the Forest of Death, we're familiar with the moment where Orochimaru tells Sasuke that he'll seek him out. How much of these elements —the things which foreshadow beyond episode 80—were retained in the game?
I was allowed to put foreshadowing in. It's part of the series. There are also parts that I absolutely can't talk about, but the story is more than episodes 1-80. So there are things we put in.



What's your favorite mini-arc within episodes 1-80?
The Chunin exam. That's where Naruto begins to impact on other people. First, the adults see the progression, and then when he's fighting Kiba, his peers begin to see that he's really, really improved. He might actually beat Kiba—so Kiba has to start taking him seriously, regardless of the whole farting thing. It continues to the fight with Neji, where the whole village is watching him and seeing that, yes, he's progressed. It's a real intense moment for the character, because this fight is his coming out, as it were.

Naruto works for adults, it works for kids. What do you think makes it so popular?
It's about everyone. Everyone has been through a childhood where at one point they're alienated, where they feel like they don't belong. And I think that's what touches everyone. It touches the part where you want to belong; you want people to like you. It's a very basic human need. That's what Naruto is all about.

If there is a sequel to the game – and we'll keep our fingers crossed – is there a moment that you're looking forward to scripting?
I can't speculate on a sequel to the game … but I can tell you my favorite parts of the upcoming story.

Sure. That'll work.
I think the first moment where Naruto discovers that his determination to believe in people isn't always founded. There's a moment where Naruto discovers that he can't change someone. It's his first real defeat…as a character. But he has to overcome this, for Sakura.

I guess, finally…is there anything you think fans should be on the look-out for?
We wanted to make the game for fans, but also for the general public. As much as I'd like to, you can't keep everything in. I've joked with the development team that fans are going to hunt me down and punch me for stuff that's not included. But the core story is there, and the character is there. That's what's important.

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE THERIEN, GAME DESIGNER >>

Interview

Philippe Therien
Game Designer

play: Hello Philippe! You're a game designer, but what is your primary focus in Rise of a Ninja?
Philippe Therien: I am in charge of the RPG mechanics in the game.

Earlier, Sebastien told me that you aren't thinking in classical RPG terms, but more in terms of character development. What does that mean to you, exactly?
It means that, traditionally, Naruto games are built a certain way. What we wanted was to let you feel like you're experiencing Naruto's world, that the player is influencing what is happening. What I mean by RPG is that you have some choices – they don't change the core story of Naruto, but they change the way that you get there, the order of these events. Like, you can train one technique or another, with Kakashi or another ninja.

Is it numbers-based, or is it more invisible than that?
It's a little bit of both. We wanted it to be really accessible. So, when we do have numbers, it's mostly for health and chakra.

I would think that RPG elements tend to skew a game towards an older demographic. What would you say is the target age for Rise of a Ninja?
The rating for the game right now is Teen. But the fanbase is actually a lot more people. As far as the RPG elements, let's say you're looking for a person – you'll get a big picture of that person, and then when you ask people whether they've seen this person or not, it'll be very obvious. You don't have to manage a quest log. You know, with a game like Oblivion, it's text, text, text, text. We wanted it to be more interactive; you don't have to read anything.

One of the things that struck me in my limited time with the game is the difficulty of the hand-seals. As Naruto levels up, will these seals become automatic, or will it get easier because the player gets better?
As you get more levels, you'll get more chakra. When you only have one level of chakra, you really have to get the timing right. But later, you'll have more time to pull of your jutsu. You could miss your attempt and then do it again. Obviously, if you're better as a player, you won't need this extra time; you could just do it as many times in a row as you want. What we have with the controls right now is complicated, but we're working to make it easier.

A lot of games are using this Active-Time-Event system, as in Shenmue, Resident Evil 4, God of War, etc, in fight and action sequences. Rise of a Ninja uses this same idea. Was there ever a time where this wasn't a part of the game, or you were considering another system?
Actually, the reason for that is, when you have a fighting game, and you do your special moves, it's always very dramatic, very attractive. But it's also very boring to the person that's on the receiving end. You know you're getting your ass kicked, but you're just sitting there, waiting for the video to be over. What we wanted to do was change the dynamics. We added the button pressing so that both players have a chance to play. The defender has something to do; you're still going to take damage, but you get a chance to avoid some of that damage. So that's where that came from. It wasn't necessarily because we played a lot of God of War, it was because we realized that that was a big flaw in fighting games.

Many of the people on this team were fans of the series before the game development began. Were you a fan?
When the process began, I wasn't really introduced to it, because it was at that time actually kind of hard to get in Canada. But now, I've restricted myself to seeing only episodes 1-80 three times. I've heard some spoilers, though, and it makes me mad! Since I'm dealing with the story a lot, it helps. I can tell people right away, "Nope, that hasn't happened yet, because I haven't heard about it." But I'm a big fan now. I like it a lot!

What's your favorite part of those first 80 episodes?
The show isn't about Big Moral Values, but Naruto goes through a lot of things that kids would go through in school, and the way he handles it; he's a bit of a knucklehead, but he always learns that there's no short way to success. I find that those values are really cool, and they're not being pushed on people. And it's still action packed, and still a lot of fun.

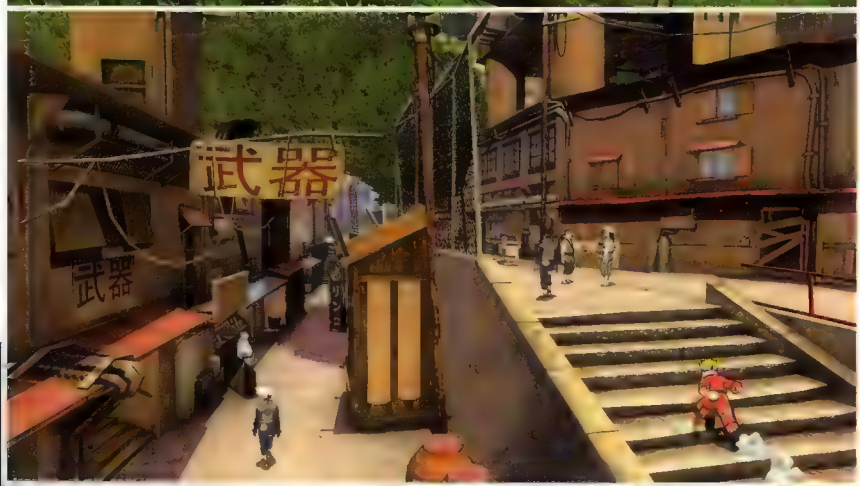
When I try to pitch the show to friends, I say it's Harry Potter, with Ninjas.
Oh, yeah, they're going to school, and learning. Actually, I think the best part of Naruto is that if you've been to school, or even if you've ever worked anywhere, you can pick out the types of people from Naruto. Like there's the rich kid who thinks he's all great, or… there's the Gaara of the office.

Now, Ann said that the game is only 8-10 hours long…
That's if you're just playing the core game, without exploring or stopping. It's actually not very accurate. I would bet that if you did everything on the side, you could pull off 20 hours.

With so many games coming in at 40-plus-hours, how much would you say that, say, the success of the DS and the Wii affected your attempt at making the game more casual?
We defiantly wanted the game to be more family-friendly, but also for everyone who wanted a cool, clean adventure game. The time of the game was never really an issue. We never said we want to go for "this amount of time." We looked at what we wanted to do for a bare minimum, and we reached that goal, so now we're adding more to the game. We wanted people to look at the game and say, "This is the Naruto experience." Now, we're just looking to give people more.

What's your favorite mechanic in the game, right now? Like, when I played, I just wanted to run everywhere as fast as possible!
That's a tough question. Being able to pull off the complicated jutsus is my favorite part, I think. Running is definitely up there. We made sure that everything in Konoha is a playground. We're planning on having races inside town, where the kids will say, "Bet you can't get to the Hokage's house in two minutes," and you have to check out the roofs and find the best paths. That's great, too!

You sound so enthusiastic!
You know, I don't mind telling you that sometimes you make a game, and you're put on a team, and… this team had line-ups. For people wanting to work on it. There's nobody on that team that doesn't like Naruto. So everybody's excited, everybody's having fun. Even the people that weren't fans when they came in… they're fans now. It's actually quite a phenomenon. I've done a lot of games, and this is the first project where everyone's walking away a big, big, big fan of the material.



"I've done a lot of games, and this is the first project where everyone's walking away a big, big, big fan of the material."

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LAIR

Everything is Factor 5 by 5

words Casey Loe

Lair is exactly what the PlayStation 3 needed at launch: A game piled high with effects that had never been done on the 360, and that perhaps never could be. As Factor 5 tidies up their masterpiece for a July release, all of Lair's frame-rate issues and controller controversies are rapidly evaporating, exposing a pick-up-and-play shooter with a stunningly beautiful world of crashing waves, billowing smoke, and panoramic environments.

Anyone who is still mourning the loss of the single-player Warhawk campaign will be pleased to know that its basic structure lives on in Lair. Each mission takes place in a vast battlefield where you'll be assigned a shifting series of objectives. Lair goes a little bit nutty with the cut scenes; every new objective, lost unit or minor storyline development triggers one, and your missions often have hidden loss conditions (such as the death of an ally or the loss of a military asset) that don't leave much time for sightseeing. But the game's finest moments come in the too-rare spaces between objectives, when you're free to soar up in the sky, watch the war raging below, and charge in to intervene wherever you see fit.

There are still a few issues left to be ironed out, such as the confusing single-arrow navigation system, but Lair is on track to becoming one of the defining games of the PS3's first year. From the exceptional prerendered cinematics to its THX-certified 7.1 soundtrack, Lair never passes up an opportunity to brutally pummel your sensory organs. How exactly does Lair produce all this pretty? We coaxed Factor 5's president, Julian Eggebrecht, away from his Lair-polishing duties to explain.

"Lair never passes up an opportunity to brutally pummel your sensory organs."

Lair	preview
System(s)	PS3
Developer	Factor 5
Publisher	SCEA
Available	July 31

Interview

Julian Eggerbrecht, president, Factor 5

So what sort of technical shenanigans are at work here? When you soar up into the air and look down, is the PS3 really rendering the full models of everything below? Or are the ground units seamlessly switching to simpler models and textures?
A magician never talks about his tricks, does he? We use every trick in the book that we have learned about over the last 10 years of making these large-scale games. That ranges from extremely cutting edge Cell CPU usage called Progressive Mesh all the way to very aggressive streaming of the models and textures from the disk and harddrive. Everything that is close to your eye is extremely detailed, whereas things in the distance "morph" their details away —all in realtime.

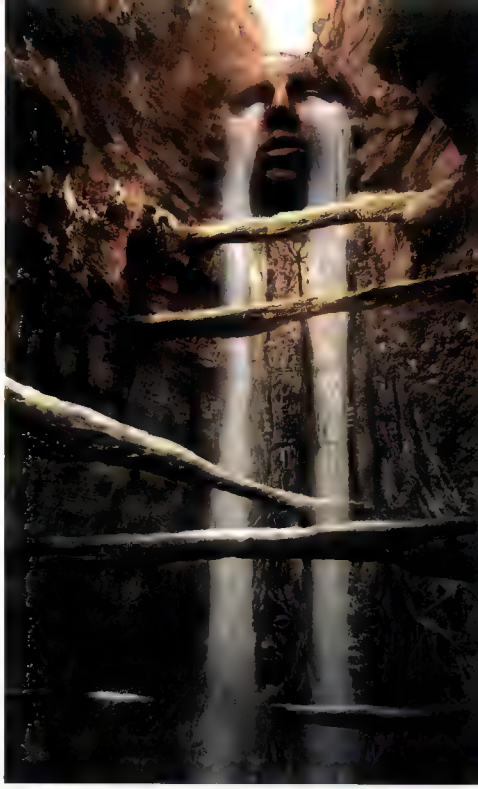
So what exactly happens to the tech that you, as a 2nd party, developed for Lair? Does Sony distribute it free to other developers? Will future developers be able to plug Lair's amazing water effects or volumetric smoke into their games with ease?
Umm, I am afraid not. The engine is ours, so if we ever pull an Unreal and decide to license the broader engine technology it would be available for other developers. There certainly isn't anything else like it out there. We are launching DivX for PS3, Xbox 360, and Wii this month to provide developers with cutting-edge full-HD cross-platform video, maybe that is only the first step.

The "secret" to PS3 programming is said to be effective use of the SPUs. Can you tell us how you've made use of them in Lair, and where you see SPU programming going in second- and third-generation games?
The core PPU of the PS3 was described once as the scheduling hardware for all the SPUs, and although that is a radical way of looking at it, Lair is approaching that by now. Other games still completely run on the PPU and that's a waste. We have ported every single bit of the engine at least partially to run on the SPUs; even the rendering makes heavy use of them. The SPUs are THE big thing in the PS3 and the key to its future growth. We use the SPUs oftentimes almost 100%, but for 2nd and 3rd generation games there are much more effective ways to utilize them. Just as with the Emotion Engine in the PS2 one can spend years learning every trick about optimal usage of the SPUs.

The motion controls certainly pull you into the game, but can you give concrete examples of what the Sixaxis allows players to do that could not be replicated with a traditional scheme that used the analog stick and more buttons?
The basic flight controls cannot give you as much fine granularity on a stubby and short analog stick as they can with the full tilt of the motion controller—that's at the very heart of the game. Outside of that core element there are of course things like the rip-and-tear attack in which you literally yank the controller to break apart objects in the game. And on top of that, even subtleties like the camera control in slow-motion moments just work beautifully with the motion control because you don't have to move your thumb onto a camera stick. Riding the dragon and fighting with other beasts would be a lesser experience, for sure.

We've yet to see a PS3 game with a Sixaxis control scheme that is the equal of the analog-stick version. What are other developers doing so wrong? Are you at all concerned that players who have become cynical about the Sixaxis will resist a game with only Sixaxis controls?
If that is a compliment about Lair getting it right—thank you! It takes a lot of time to get motion control readings and interpretation right. Look at the Wii games from third parties. None of them uses the Wiimote as nicely as Wii Sports. Motion control is hard because we are dealing with humans and motion is something

This is your brain on w.



"Don't force it on games that don't need it. Motion control should enhance the experience."

-Julian Eggebrecht

fuzzy. It seems we all move the same, but when it comes to the nitty-gritty details, your body motions are likely to be very different from mine.
Secondly, the game needs to be a fit. Don't force it on games that don't need it. Motion control should enhance the experience.

The Gamer's Day demo was very beginner-friendly. Are aspects like the generous auto-targeting going to be part of the final game? Will fans of more technical shooters have an option to tone down such features?
We are trying the same balance as in the Rogue Squadron games with Lair. The generous auto-targeting will help beginner players in completing the missions, but pros will find deep and very hardcore strategies and techniques the longer they play the game. We have plenty of unlockable secrets hidden for them via our medal system, and via the online leaderboards people can compare their medals.

Plus, one thing to be sure of, Lair is not about targeting. It's about utilizing and layering the different physical attack systems to get maximum combos and carnage points. Fire and targeting is a small portion of the game for a hardcore player.

It can be a little tricky to keep track of your enemies—are there any plans to add a radar? Or are you intentionally keeping the HUD to a minimum to emphasize the cinematic aspects?
You got it. We think that in the final implementation of our targeting glows, we point out enemies well enough. There is also Rage Vision, which is a vision mode you can activate at any time that clearly points out who and what is mission critical.

You've said in the past that multiplayer will be reserved for the sequel (if there is one). So what does the Lair Online option on the title screen do?
Leaderboards, messaging to friends and foes who might be playing Lair, and of course direct access to the Lair Homepage for FAQs, manual, and discussions with other players. Although we stopped right at multi-player, we try to use every single-player relevant feature of the PlayStation Network.

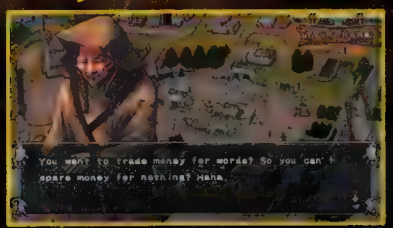
Rohn's cool and all, but the dragon seems to be doing all the real work. Does she play a part in the story? Does she have a name?
Isn't that the case with horses as well? What did all those Cowboys really do. Rohn whispers something in an early stables scene, maybe there is a name there?

We're really looking forward to the game's release on July 31 (you're still on track, right?). Will you be releasing a downloadable demo before that?
We are still on track, absolutely. But let's finish the game first and see about a demo then, shall we?

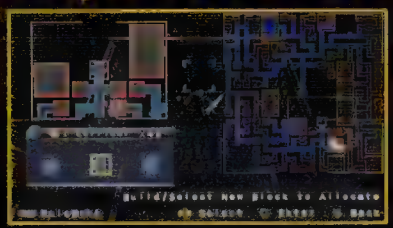
This is game design of the highest order.

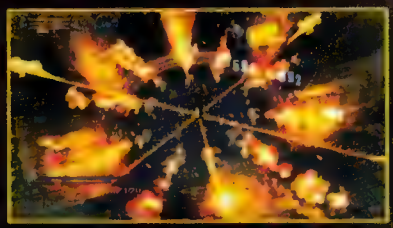
Dungeon Maker
Hunting Ground

If you make it, they will come.



Create elaborate custom dungeons to draw the most powerful (and valuable) monsters away from the nearby town.





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Fantasy Violence
Mild Suggestive Themes
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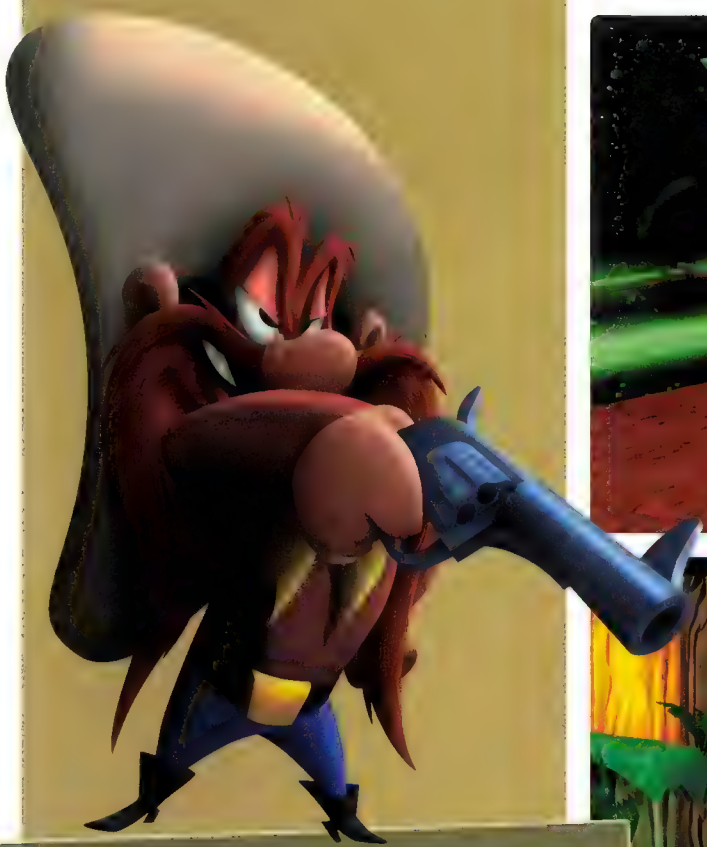
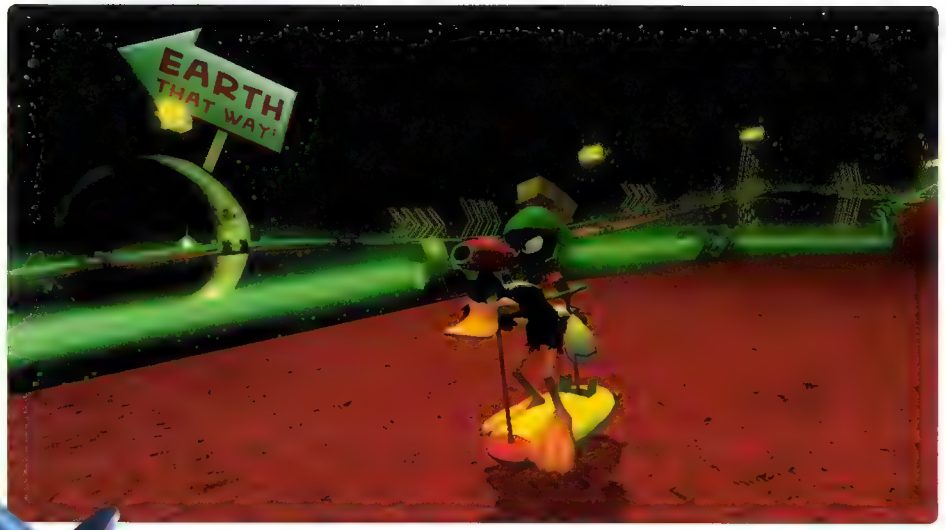
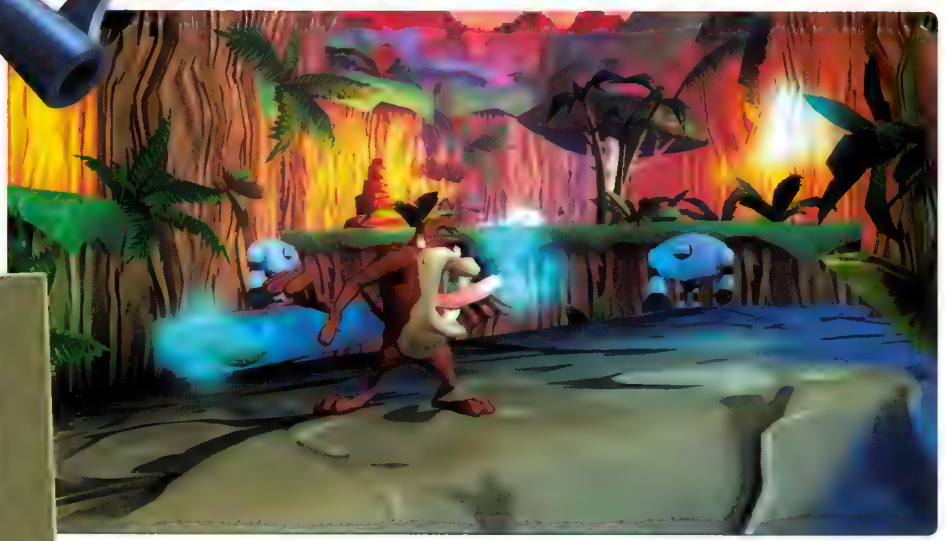
PSP PlayStation Portable







Looney Tunes Acme Arsenal

It's what's up Doc

words Dave Halverson

"It's manic, over-the-top and 100% grade-A Looney Tunes."

Big hammer plus big robot plus Acme Railroad Tracks equals?

Looney Tunes has been a staple of quality licensed gaming going on three decades. From 16-bit through the last generation, not only have LT games dropped frequently but, more often than not, they've been gems. Konami's Bugs Bunny Rabbit Rampage and Tiny Toon Adventures: Buster's Hidden treasure, Sega's Taz-Mania, Atari's Looney Tunes Space Race, and Taz Wanted...all great stuff. After a brief respite the first game back, Red Tribe's Acme Arsenal, may just top them all.

Once again the emphasis is on pick-up-and-play arcade fun, only this time not only does everything look its absolute best with each console boasting its own special features, but all the best characters are here, via 2-player co-op or solo action. Bugs, Daffy, Taz, Foghorn, Marvin, Gossamer and a secret character (that's not Yosemite Sam) all get into the action.

The gameplay, which weighs in at roughly 80/20 shooting to platforming along with some insanely cool vehicles, is extremely polished, packed with clever action puzzles and an emphasis on shooting and power-ups fit for a toon. It's manic, over-the-top and 100% grade-A Looney Tunes. Although our in-office demo was strictly hands-off, pretty much everyone in the room lit up watching their favorite character in action, complete with current voice talent in tow and the kind of sound effects and music you'd expect from familiar haunts like Camelot, Egypt, Mars, The Wild West, and World War 1.

Of the three versions, the Wii game is designed specifically for the Nunchuk and is one of the few games designed expressly for the hardware; the PS2 game features an exclusive level and character skin, and the 360 version, well, it pretty much drops a big fat ACME safe on the lot of 'em, with HD graphics, real-time physics, animation blending and 2-player co-op over Live.

Looney Tunes Acme Arsenal

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Wii, Xbox 360
Developer	Red Tribe
Publisher	Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Online/Multi	1-2
Available	Fall

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Shin Megami Tensei

Persona 3

words Eric L. Patterson

"Much like its young protagonists, this chapter of Persona contains within it a dual personality."

So enamored with the original Persona was I upon my initial experience with it, I went to work putting together the first (and for a long time only) English-language fansite for the game, The Velvet Room. What drew me to Persona, and later the series as a whole, was an RPG experience that bucked the tradition of fantasy or outer space sci-fi settings, and instead dealt with realistic people and places spun together with the unexplained and supernatural.

Persona 3, the fourth piece of the Persona legacy, stays true to those core elements that hooked myself and many others in the first place. This is still a tale of a rag-tag group of high school students, brought together through their shared ability to summon "Personas," powerful alter-egos who are the key to stopping the spread of the forces of darkness. Access to those demons still comes from navigating and surviving a sprawling dungeon, this time presented as the mysterious labyrinth called Tartarus.

Much like its young protagonists, however, this chapter of Persona contains within it a dual personality. Gone are the days of the high school at the center of the story being just a convenient backdrop for the action that is about to unfold. Instead, it now sets the stage for truly building upon the two sides of life the Persona series has always centered around—that of being a crusader against the darkness while also trying to live the life of a typical teenage student. Balancing saving the world with paying attention in class, making new friends, or finding that perfect after-school club to attend helps immensely in creating a connection to those characters whose lives are in our hands. And yet, it also serves a very important purpose, one that will directly affect your ability to fight the growing menace that the game's monsters–"Shadows" as they are called here–pose. Meeting new people and cultivating relationships builds "social links" with those characters, and as these bonds grow stronger, so too will your potential when it comes to developing new and more powerful Personas.

Thus, the quiet, loner RPG hero archetype has been pushed aside; it's no longer about simply saving the lives of the people around you, it's about knowing who they are, and giving a damn about them in the first place.

Persona 3: Shin Megami Tensei	
System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Atlus
Publisher	Atlus
Online/Multi	1
Available	Summer 2007

BRAVE STORY

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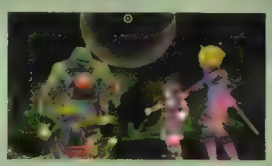

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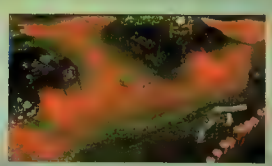

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Tom Clancy's
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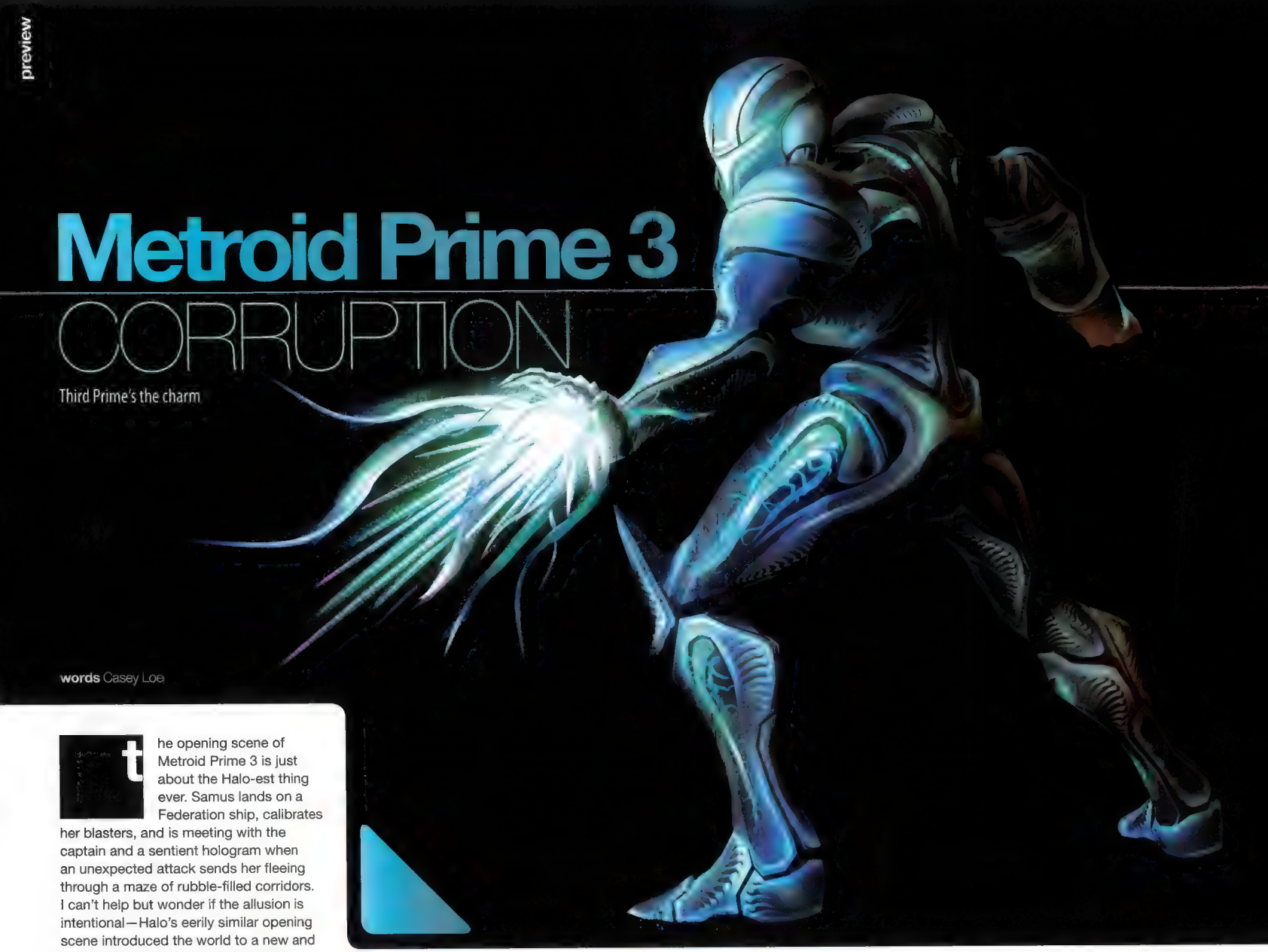
Metroid Prime 3 CORRUPTION

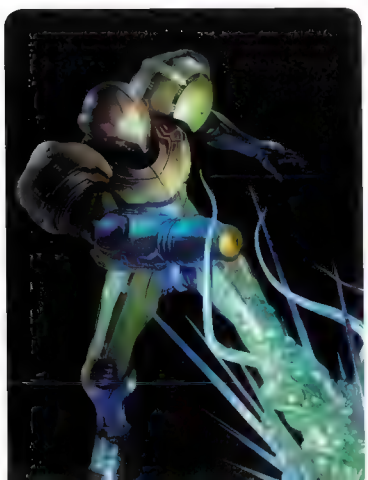
Third Prime's the charm



words Casey Loe

The opening scene of Metroid Prime 3 is just about the Halo-est thing ever. Samus lands on a Federation ship, calibrates her blasters, and is meeting with the captain and a sentient hologram when an unexpected attack sends her fleeing through a maze of rubble-filled corridors. I can't help but wonder if the allusion is intentional—Halo's eerily similar opening scene introduced the world to a new and wildly successful FPS control scheme, and Metroid Prime 3 may be the first game since to accomplish the same feat.

In the game's Advanced Scheme, you move with the Nunchuk and control a targeting reticule with the Wiimote pointer. The farther you move the reticule from the center of the screen, the faster you'll turn the camera, allowing you to slowly scan a room or spin quickly to blast an approaching foe. The Wiimote offers more precision than a double-stick controller (no need for aim assists here!) and a level of immersion that a mouse-and-keyboard combo could never hope to match. Just watch out for that hair-trigger sensitivity—you'll send your camera into a tailspin every time you sneeze.



The tedious switching of visors, weapons, and gear from past installments has been mostly removed in Prime 3. Your beams and missiles "stack" the way they did in Super Metroid, so there's no need to switch between them, and you can flip on a visor quickly by pressing the minus button and flicking the Wiimote toward the appropriate side of the screen. The Grapple Beam can be deployed with a forward twist of your Nunchuk wrist, and reeled in with the reverse. It all takes a bit of getting used to, but by the time Samus escapes the besieged Federation ship and lands on the first planet, it should feel like second nature.

Upon landing, Samus's first mission is Metroid at its action-packed best, and peaks with an intense Ridley battle that plays out like a God of War boss fight. The other two bosses in the demo were a little more traditional, but all three were extremely well-designed; I died exactly once on each, and then crushed them with the tactics learned from the first fight.

Nintendo gave Retro Games extra time to ensure that Metroid Prime 3 would be at least the equal of Zelda, and Retro president Michael Kelvaugh says they mostly spent it on "a lot of balance, a lot of polish, and a lot of feedback." "After [Metroid Prime 2], we heard two things loud and clear: One was that the re-traversal needs to make more sense. The other is the overall difficulty. So the challenge is, how do we address that without dumbing down the experience? How do we make it accessible to more people without simply making it easier? We spent a lot of time making sure we did that right." The silky smooth difficulty curve is apparent in even the first few hours of play; the game dishes out mounting threats while subtly teaching you how to overcome them.

But don't worry that Metroid Prime has turned into some sort of wussy blue-ocean family title. "It's definitely not for grandma," promises director Mark Pacini. "First and foremost, we're here to make a great game for our fans. Beyond that, we wanted to bring over other gamers who might like other types of games, but who might not have given a first-person shooter a chance."

And Metroid Prime does seem to have everything we were hoping to see in a Prime title. After the first planet showed off the rock-solid shooting controls, the second was a reminder that exploration remains the series' main focus. It featured a moody, eerily beautiful floating city that was rich in mysteries but light on combat—a great place to show off Corruption's upgraded graphics. "More

"Having these larger environments where the player can see farther and see things interacting with each other is something we couldn't have done on GameCube."

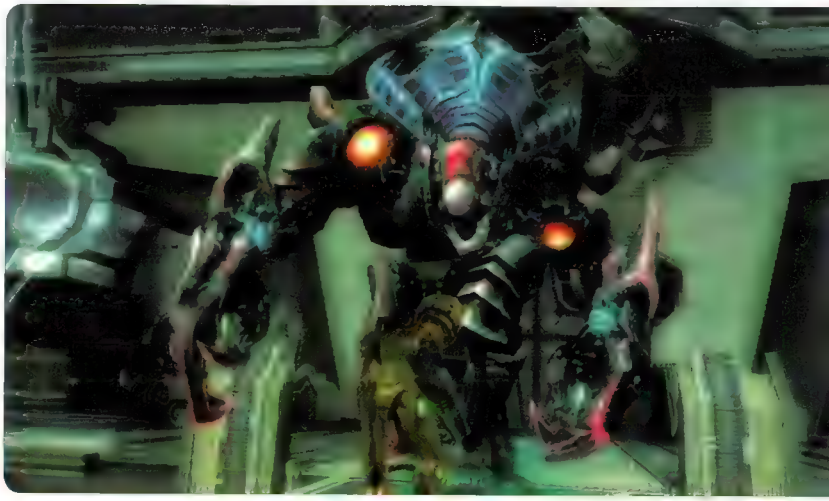
polygons, higher-res textures, bloom lighting," ticks off Pacini when asked how he used the Wii's additional power. "We try to tell the story through the way the player travels through the game, and having these larger environments where the player can see farther and see things interacting with each other is something we couldn't have done on GameCube."

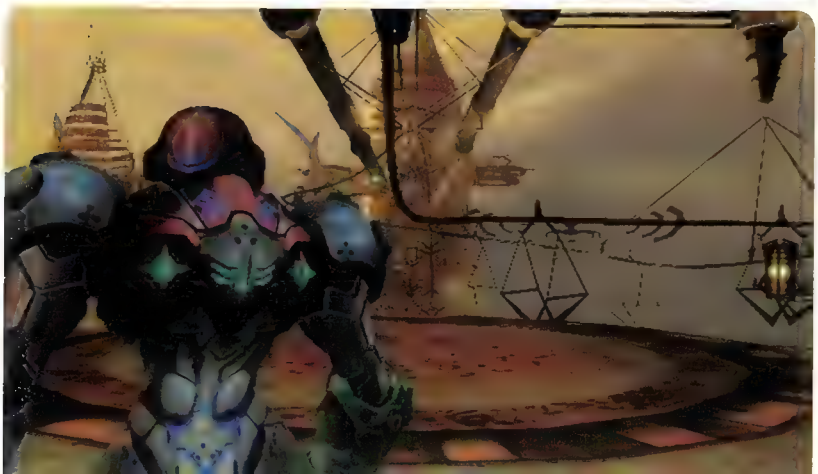
One aspect of the game that had been removed from the demos is the "Hypermode" that becomes available to Samus after she finds a suit that allows her to exploit the corrupting power of Phazon. "It's a very prevalent feature with a learning curve spread throughout the entirety of the game. It's not something that we could have just plunked into a [demo] level," explains Kelvaugh. "Plus, it's a really cool feature, and we want to leave something for speculation." The demo did provide plenty of fuel for that: Phazon-corrupted Federation grunts were kicking ass in a manner that was frankly unseemly. Don't they know that their job is to die tragically when Samus enters the room? But the red-shirts' day in the sun may not last long; while the power of Phazon is unparalleled, using too much seems to be fatal.

It sucks that Nintendo is keeping such a tight lid on the "holy trinity" of Metroid, Mario, and Smash Bros., but there is a bright side to that strategy. Now that this brief peek at Metroid has whetted our appetites, we won't have to wait long to tear into the final version. You'll find it on store shelves on the morning of August 20, and in a million glowing blue drive slots a few minutes after.

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption — preview

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Retro Games
Publisher	Nintendo
Available	August 20





"We're not going to reinvent Halo."

—Lars Bakken, multiplayer designer, Bungie

Halo 3

Ring Around the Xbox...

words Greg Orlando

Meet the new boss. He's the same as the old boss.

With Microsoft's behemoth Halo 3, the formula hasn't changed greatly. "We know what worked in Halo 1 and 2," Lars Bakken, the game's multiplayer designer says. "We're not going to reinvent Halo. It's such a finely balanced, well-honed game to begin with."

Halo 3 brings to an end the Master Chief story arc. Bakken refers to the game as developer Bungie's "Return of the King." The first-person shooter promises to wrap up the story of Chief, his computerized ally Cortana, and the villainous aliens in the Covenant and Flood. But Bungie isn't talking about that. Not just yet.

Instead, Microsoft and Bungie are celebrating the launch of the Halo 3 multiplayer beta testing period. Microsoft sponsored huge events in both San Francisco and New York in early May to launch Halo 3 in style, with thousands of people given access to one of video games' most anticipated titles.

For the beta testing, three maps were made available to players: Snowbound, High Ground, and Valhalla. Each is a portal into the developers' minds and offers distinct insights into the way this new Halo differs from its previous iterations. "We made a lot of refinements," Bakken says. "They're going to change the way you play the game."

Of the three new maps, High Ground is the most compact. This is where the

Note the sick details on the weapon and vehicle.

Chief on Chief... on Chief. Online gamers rejoice.

first-person gameplay becomes up close and personal, with lots of melee attacks and grenades used to wipe out opposing players. High Ground starts one team off in the ruins of a human military installation and the other team on a beach not too far away. Lots of choke points dominate this terrain, and players will have access to one of the game's new vehicles in the Mongoose ATV. This zippy little number has no weapons on it, but it's great for scouting and carrying a second player around. As a tool in capture-the-flag contests, it probably holds some value, but already the pundits are derisively calling the underpowered vehicle "the deathcycle." As in, "it will be a very short ride, lifewise, on the deathcycle."

The second map, Valhalla, offers something Bungie calls "man cannons." These are jet-powered lifts that can be used to hurl men, vehicles, and even grenades a great distance. Using these lifts, it's possible to vault incredibly high in the air, cover great distances, and snipe at enemies from above. Valhalla, which is more expansive than High Ground, is cut in two by a large river. It's a really great map for vehicles, and 16-player combat.

Snowbound, the last of the three maps is dominated by snow and two huge alien structures connected by a series of underground tubes. The structures feature translucent barriers that allow players to pass through freely, but that are impenetrable by weapon fire and explosions. Automated gun turrets ring Snowbound and anyone foolish enough to cross outside of the borders will be shot.

These new fixtures such as the gun turrets and man cannons will have portable functionality, too. Portable lifts can be picked up and dropped anywhere; Bakken suggests it will be particularly nasty to drop the lifts inside of doorways, causing anyone who walks over them to be lifted up to the ceiling and rendered a sitting duck. Turrets and other emplacements can become support weaponry. All a player need do here is approach an emplacement, use a melee attack to knock the weapon from its base, and then pick up gun or cannon. While using a support weapon, players won't have access to grenades or melee attacks, but the heavy firepower more than compensates for these deficiencies.

There's lots more to experience with the Halo 3 beta; bubble shields offer temporary protection for solders in a given, fixed, area. There are now tripmines and a power drain device. New Covenant weapons include a powerful Brute Laser, which takes four seconds to charge, and a new spike grenade. Players can reload individual guns with either the left or right bumper on the Xbox 360 controller, and great matches can be saved and replayed over and over again via the game's "saved films" function.

The beta is just a taste, but it's a fine one. Halo 3 will see release on September 25.

Halo 3 — Multiplayer

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Bungie
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	September

Dynasty Warriors: Gundam

The Gundam game fans have been waiting for

words Dave Halverson

I know that what I'm about to say may too difficult to believe especially after the tragedy that was the PS3's Mobile Suit Gundam Crossfire, but Gundam fans are actually within range of a game worthy of the namesake—Dynasty Warriors: Gundam. Title sound familiar? Bandai has finally done the right thing and let somebody else take the levers, namely Koei, who've taken the Gundam product and done what they do best—fill the screen with adversaries for some real-time warfare, Gundam style. DWG takes a good thing (mass warfare) and makes it shine all the brighter by sticking to tradition with easy-to-assimilate intermissions (upgrading and equipping your Mobile Suits is a snap) that allow players to get straight into the story-rich ground and space sorties. Once on the field of battle an easy-to-navigate color-coded display shows what quadrant you're in as your teammates and HQ direct you where to go next, prompted onscreen by the most efficient navigation system the series has ever seen (past versions have been a logistical nightmare). Better yet, the Mobile Suits themselves feel limber—more like they *appear* in the anime—rather than the heavy, laborious robots Bandai has tried to convey in versions past.

Don't come looking for high-concept gaming, but if highly polished mission-based melee and shooting amidst the fascinating world of Gundam is your idea of fun, you'd be hard pressed to do any better. The sight of hundreds of highly detailed Gundams going at it at 60 fps is a sight for sore eyes, especially in HD. And the control is near flawless, including a generous supply of easy-to-execute combos that fill your special gauge for devastating slow-motion attacks.

Early hiccups include some texture popping, visible terrain seams and balancing issues, but otherwise all systems are go, as long as you don't mind a few do-overs. Missions are long, often spanning 20 minutes, and should you die 15 minutes in on the fourth mini-boss, well, it's back to the hangar you go. Skill levels acquired in battle do accumulate, however, so, it isn't all for not. Hey: if it was a walk in the park, why bother? This is war after all.

"The sight of hundreds of highly detailed Gundams going at it at 60 fps is a sight for sore eyes. . ."

Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	
System(s)	PS3
Developer	Koei
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Available	September

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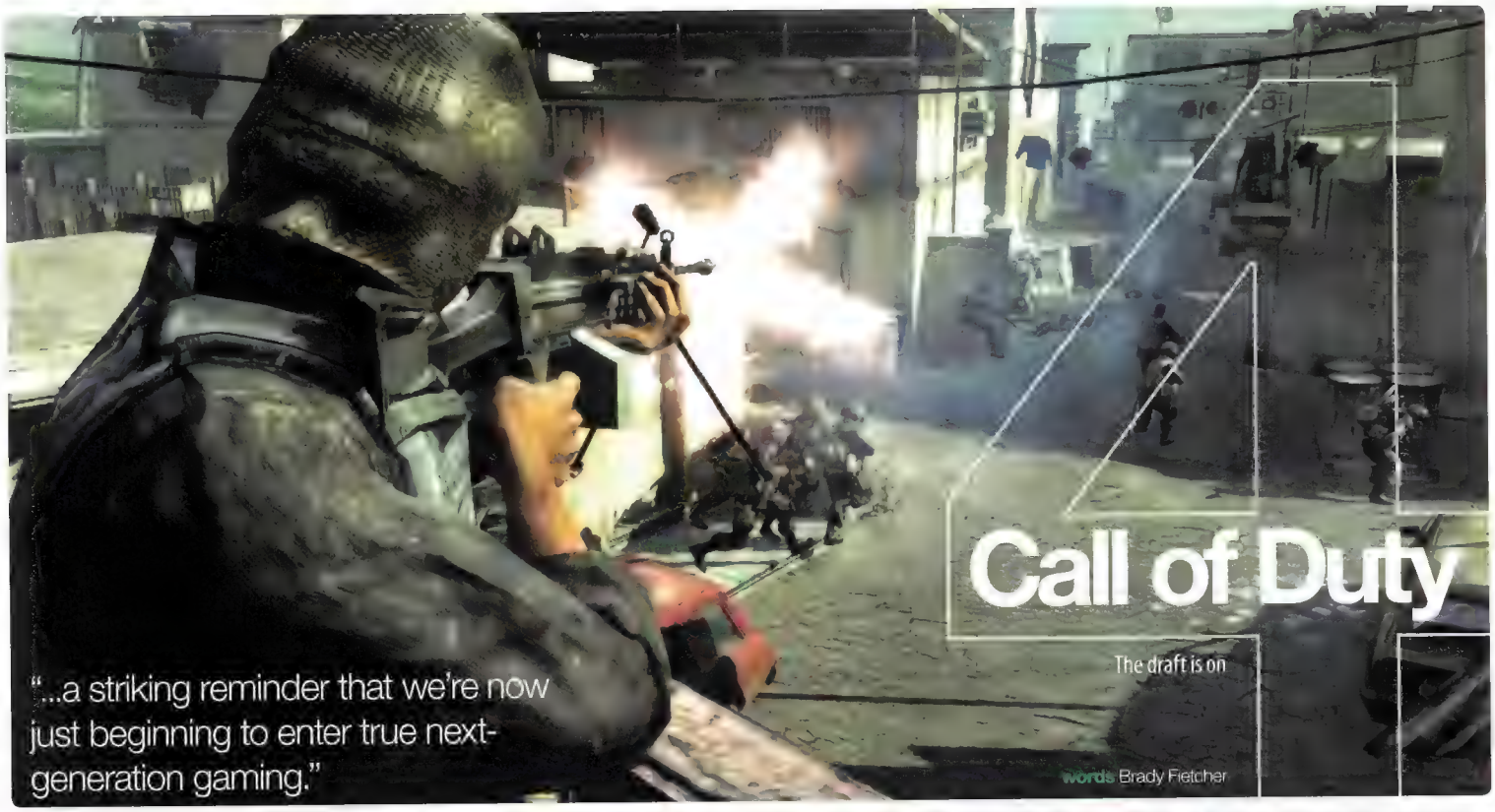


Call of Duty

The draft is on

"...a striking reminder that we're now just beginning to enter true next-generation gaming."

Words Brady Fletcher

The setting has moved from the primitive expanses of the second World War to the hi-tech stomping grounds of terrorist-infected modern soil—but this is clearly Call of Duty at the core. Without even touching a controller, the movement and flow of the first-person soldier, the zoom and lock of the weapons, the feel of it all, communicates the undeniable touch of one of the most respected FPS series out there.

Developer Infinity Ward has had a lot of time to refine the foundation of their series and build outward in new and dramatic ways. This campaign is still steeped in the spectacular chaos of large-scale battles, and you're still in command of a singular soldier surrounded by a flurry of allies, yet a dramatic change in time period is only the beginning of what defines Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare as something different for the series.

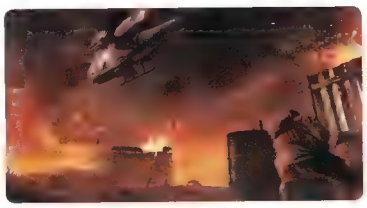
The technology behind the game is a leap ahead of Call of Duty 2, a striking reminder that we're now just beginning to enter true next-generation gaming. All sorts of new-level effects are being used, and entire scenes use depth of field to create authentic scale and blend everything together more seamlessly. Clouds look vaporous and full of dimension, insects buzz all around, birds fly out of trees and dot the sky. The sun rises and falls and, like any light source in the game—the lightning crashing in the opening cargo-ship raid is incredibly atmospheric—casts shadows that are all dynamic. Post processing similar to film—a technique where color schemes can be delicately shifted to create broad ranges in tone—can occur in real time. And on and on, running at... 60 frames a second. This fidelity hasn't been pulled off yet in a console game.

Oh, and I have to mention that absolutely bad-ass heat effect streaming from the back of a tank in battle, which the team got to model off while studying live-action scenarios. An immense amount of research went into making Call of Duty 4, and when sections were put into place, advisors were asked to chime in on the result. Interestingly, certain equipment that might seem nifty to you or I was omitted when explained that some stuff is worthless junk out in the real field.

When a setting in the game was scaled out to show all the massive details going on in every corner, it was more than just the detail that impressed, more the lack of artifice. Someone at Infinity Ward actually mocked up a fake CNN news page with screens from the game, which they boasted you couldn't really tell a difference from a broadcast.

Contrast is an important goal for the final game, both in look and play—time of day, indoor and outdoor, tight quarters and open fields. A stealth mission takes you through thick grass; after a Russian escort raid, you take off in an AC-130—a giant lumbering beast of a plane that can only go out at night—and use night vision to pelt targets on the ground with munitions and chain-gun fire while avoiding friendlies. In one of the most memorable moments I saw, an indoor storm of troops streaked the total darkness with laser sites that danced maniacally in every direction, like some crazy light show; these sights can only be seen through night vision goggles.

See insanely detailed character with shadow.



Infinity Ward points out that they're big on making sure the player knows what to do. Certain areas are more direct in their path, others have broader areas of exploration, and there's always an effort to create an illusion of vulnerability and open choice. One analogy that's mentioned likened the design philosophy to a supermarket: There's an exit, and an entrance, but the isles you go down are totally up to you.

Online... four goals: Fun, community, depth and accessibility. There's a party system, where you can invite friends online or to a private much. If you're on a friends list and pop online, you can jump right in without waiting.

An unlockable system will gradually allow you to discover new ways of playing. An experience system will also allow upping in ranks and creating classes. A series of slots forces you to pick and choose tweaks, like rate of fire, damage, faster reload, endurance.

Call of Duty 2 was a huge online success; Infinity Ward is taking it all to an entirely new level.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Infinity Ward
Publisher	Activision
Online/Multi	1-16
Available	Fall

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"Ubisoft isn't big on subtlety: Fisher is trying to be that guy who's trying entirely too hard to blend in to the crowd"

Splinter Cell Conviction

Cellular decay

words Greg Orlando

"You've never played a Splinter Cell game like this before," Ubisoft proclaims on the Splinter Cell: Conviction website.

With Conviction, Ubisoft is taking a new direction with its approach to stealth. Previous games in the series had agent Sam Fisher using the shadows for concealment, skulking about in dark corners so as not to be seen. With Conviction, Fisher will be out among the crowds and, like a certain other Ubisoft title featuring medieval assassins and their various creeds, the emphasis will be placed on making diversions to shift attention away from the game's protagonist.

Fisher has been stripped of his agent status, and is now being hunted by his former employers. Game programmer Raphael Parent suggests there's a conspiracy at work here. "Sam has to clear his name," Parent says. Fisher committed some offense, Parent suggests, but there's more to the story than can be revealed here. "The cancer is very high up," Parent says cryptically. "Sam can't do a lot, but he's trying."

Fisher is, literally, back in black. From head to toe, his shoes, pants, hoodie sweatshirt, and jacket are all black. A black shoulder bag is slung around his back and his new beard and mustache is, surprise, mostly black, too. Ubisoft isn't big on subtlety; Fisher is trying to be that guy who's trying entirely too hard to blend in to the crowd.

It was interesting to note Conviction had a brand-new "Memento sequence" feature that, Parent suggests, will not likely be included in the final version. The feature seemed to be a help feature offering a picture-in-picture that showed players hiding spots and the like. It's possible that this feature is entirely too similar to the one used in Assassin's Creed, where the protagonist Altair can be partially guided by intuition.

In this new-styled Splinter Cell, Fisher will frequently be forced to navigate through crowds. Here, he can lock on to a non-player character and follow his or her movements through a crowd. By jumping from person to person, Parent says Fisher can navigate through crowds without raising suspicion. "It's just like Frogger or something," he says, tongue firmly in cheek. When Fisher needs to create a diversion, he'll be able to manipulate both people and objects in the world. In one instance, Fisher simply pulled a gun and blasted a propane tank to send people into a panic while he sauntered past police.

And fear not: Ubisoft hasn't neglected Fisher's potential for unleashing a torrent of whoop-ass on anyone who might cross him. "You can still kick as much as you ever did," Parent says about Conviction.

The strength of Ubisoft's Conviction will be felt later this year. Bank on it.

Splinter Cell: Conviction

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	Winter 2007

Brothers in Arms
Hell's Highway

Once again, on the Highway to Hell

words Greg Orlando

"There's no ghosts. We're only haunted by ourselves and our actions," Sergeant Baker, the gruff protagonist of the first-person shooter Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway muses before leaping into battle.

The Germans can expect to take yet another one on the chin. Hell's Highway is based on Operation Market Garden, an airborne operation during World War II. The allied forces, among them the United States, Britain, Canada, and Poland, attempted to end the war with Market Garden. The idea was for the Allied forces to drop in and secure important locations in German-held territory, specifically, the Netherlands. By doing so, the allies would have opened a path straight to Nazi Germany; although various objectives were taken and held by the allies, Market Garden was ultimately a failure.

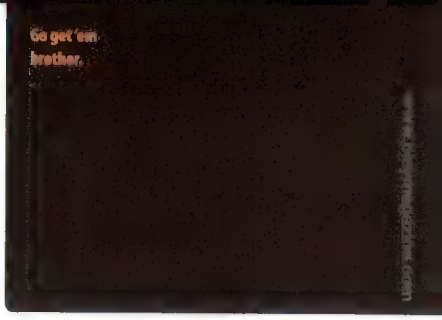
Highway re-creates the eight-day fight, offering squad-based combat. As the U.S. soldier Baker, players get to fight as part of the 101st airborne division and will be able to command different combat crews with different specialties. Machine gunners, for example, excel against infantry and are great at laying down suppression fire. Bazooka teams can assault tanks and wreck buildings and mortar squads can drop high explosives on enemies from a distance.

Destructible environments add a layer of realism to the proceedings; during one fight, the Germans and the allies tore the hell out of a stone angel in a courtyard. Taking cover is a very good idea here, but staying in one place for too long definitely is not. During gameplay, players will be able to command, say, a mortar team to wreck a wall the Germans are hiding behind, or have a bazooka team lay waste to a sandbag barrier.

There's no micromanagement to be had in Hell's Highway. Players simply aim at a spot and the squad members will take cover behind it or assault it. This simplicity frees players to concentrate on creating good strategies for everyone's favorite sport: killing Germans (within the context of a video game, that is). Players can sneak up on a squad of Germans and order their machine gun teams to create a deadly ambush. Or they can pin the hated Germans down with mortar fire, allowing Baker to flank them and hit them from the back or sides. The ability to get creatively nasty seems to be Hell's Highway's most delightful feature.

In addition to the single-player adventure, Gearbox and Ubisoft will be offering a host of multiplayer modes that blend squad-based action with team play. There will also be various modes offering free-for-all combat, but specifics here, sadly, are a matter for another day.

"This simplicity frees players to concentrate on creating good strategies for everyone's favorite sport: killing Germans (within the context of a video game, that is)."



Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway	
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Gearbox Software
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	1-2
Available	TBD

Transformers
THE GAME

Transformers transformed

Autobots. Decepticons. Pick from a selection of one or the other and go blow stuff up. If that was pretty much the entire breakdown of Transformers: The Game, there are probably more than enough disciples of the '80s cartoon who'd demand little more to fulfill their worship. But in this apocalyptic battle of the bots, you don't just blow stuff up, you fire missiles to bring down chunks of buildings, toss around cars from the screaming-people-infested streets into whatever looks like is in the way, transform into helicopters jets, and Camaros, pummel big robot bosses with meaty melee attacks, and speed through the epicenter of mass chaos. Of course, all in the name of blowing stuff up.

And you do so with some of the most awesome looking robots imaginable, thanks in no small part to the access the developers had to ILM's designs for the *Transformers* movie. These transformers are there in spirit from the cartoon, but this is all very much the inspiration you'd expect tailing a Michael Bay production—flashy and big and over-the-top. There's bound to be some purists upset by the modernized sizzle applied to the charming simplicity of what we remember of the early Transformers. So be it. Again, the robots look *awesome*.

Transformers: The Game follows the outline from the movie, drawing off set pieces from desert to city to mountainside as the action connects the unfolding story. It's not being designed for all sorts of freedom; you're basically transforming and destroying your way through set paths, which offer various incentive of play depending on which side you're on. As a Decepticon—bad guys here to demolish earth—you are encouraged to take everything out. As an Autobot—good guys here to defend—you'll want to play with more caution for a different set of rewards.

We all know the typical track record of movie-game releases and Transformers games in general, but we've got some important factors at play here: a) Transformers, b) Traveller's Tales did a unique and fantastic job with Star Wars in the Legos series.

Like the film, the in game models look a far cry better than the old cartoons.

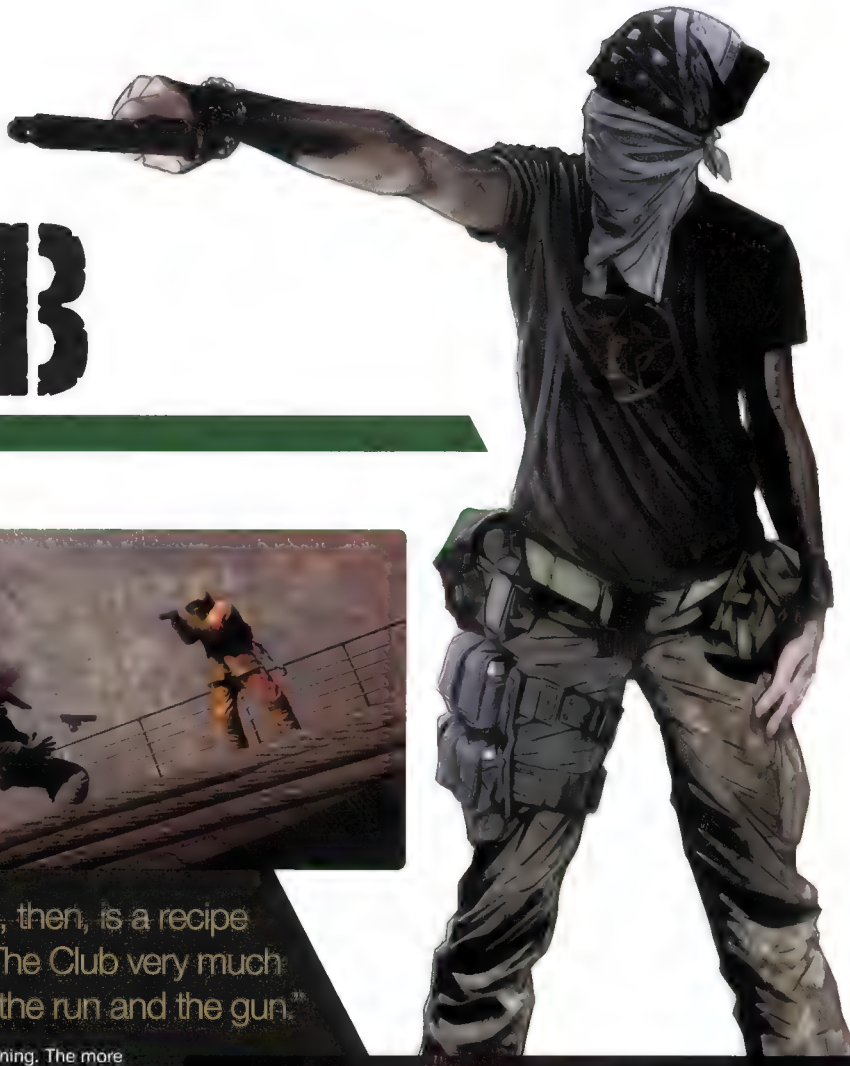
Transformers: The Game	
System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PS2, Wii
Developer	Traveller's Tales
Publisher	Activision
Available	July

"...transform into helicopters, jets and Camaros, pummel big robot bosses with meaty melee attacks..."

The Club

Not so much with the dancing and overpriced drinks...

words Greg Orlando



At once, The Club is Burnout with guns. Which is, in fact, a very good thing.

For the uninitiated, Burnout is a brilliant racing game where players are rewarded for wrecking other cars and creating mayhem. Sega and developer Bizarre Creations have taken this idea—shamelessly, thank the heavens—and applied it to a balls-out third-person shooter.

The Club focuses on an underground bloodsport and offers eight different characters to choose from. Players will be able to take the role of a hardened Russian tank named Dragov or the speedy former New York City policeman Renwick, among others, and each of the eight has a particular reason for wanting to compete in The Club's violent exhibitions. Some are there to pay off debts, and others, go figure, just enjoy killing. But this, of course, seems like window dressing. What matters is that each of the characters will vary in terms of speed, stamina, and strength.

Actually, what matters here is destruction. Players are rewarded for stringing together acts of violence and destruction. A combination meter tracks a player's kills; the goal here is to keep the meter from fully draining. The more kills the player makes, the higher the bonus points. Standing still, then, is a recipe for suckers; The Club very much pushes both the run and the gun.

"Standing still, then, is a recipe for suckers; The Club very much pushes both the run and the gun."

Players will also be rewarded for using weapons in their proper manner, say, with bonuses for blasting people with shotguns at close range and sniping them from a distance with long-range rifles. Further, the developers have also included a series of plates emblazoned with skulls in each level for players to find. These aren't merely baubles to be found and collected; shooting them resets the kill combo meter, and gives players more opportunities to add more bodies to the pile.

In terms of numbers, the Club offers eight battlegrounds such as a prison, underground bunker, German steel mill, ocean liner, manor house, and a canal-laden terrain that seems to be Venice, Italy. There will be 17 different weapons to use in the course of gameplay, among them machine guns, sniper rifles, pistols, and the like. Sega representatives made mention of customizable weaponry, but certainly did not elaborate on the matter. Single-player modes come in five different varieties, and 16-player online mode will also be included. Sadly, neither Sega nor Bizarre had much to say about the game's online competitions.

Admission to this Club may well be worth $50. Watered-down drinks and aged bar floozies not included.

Shoot first; never ask questions.

The Club	preview
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Bizarre Creations
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	Fall

Sega Rally Revo

You say you want a revolution, well . . .

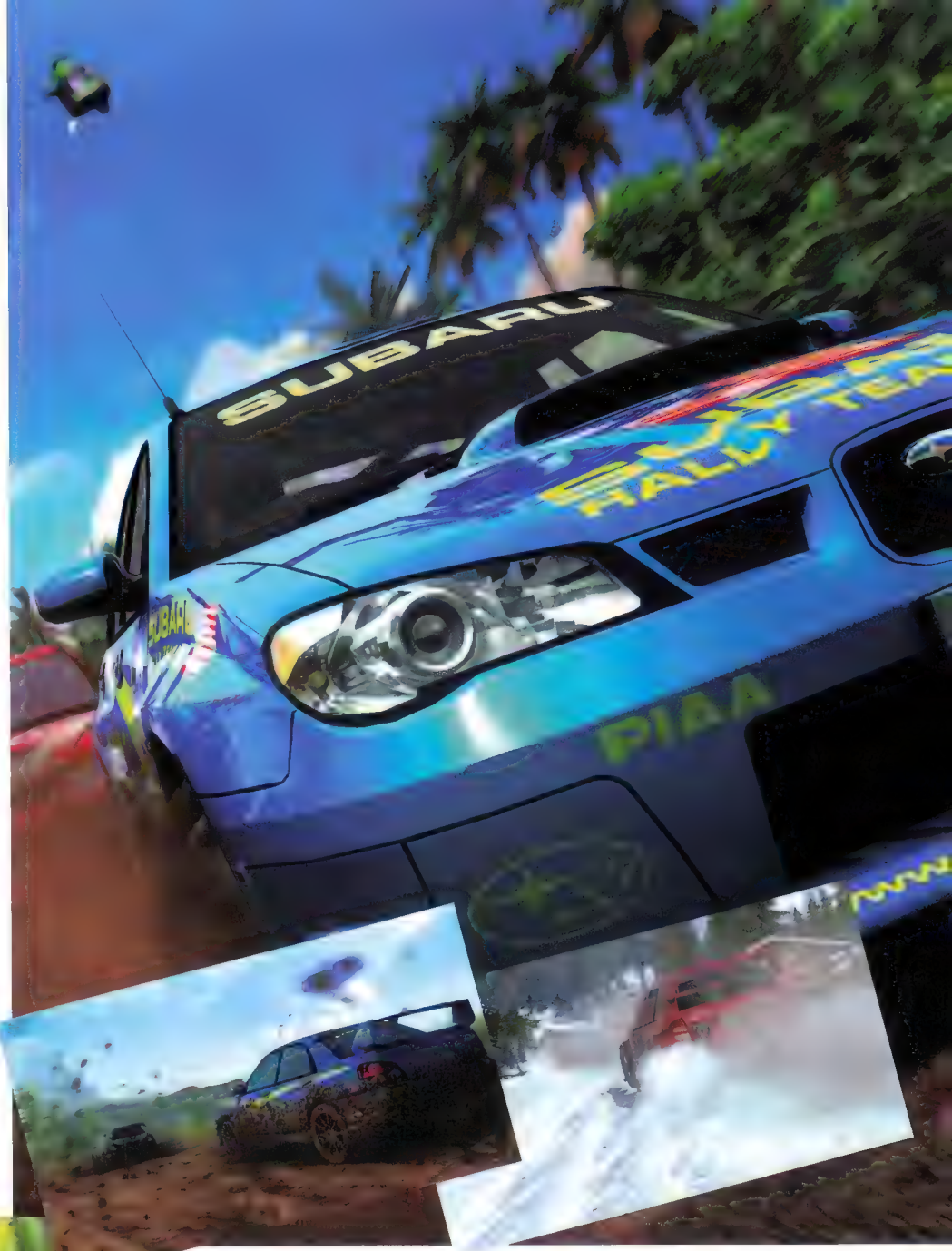
words Greg Orlando

An old classic gets a brand-new look when Sega's newly formed Driving Studio takes a crack at the arcade and console game Sega Rally.

Sega showed off the game at a recent gamer's day held in the company's San Francisco headquarters. The PlayStation 3 version of the game was featured, and although the game is still relatively early in its development, it looked suitably wonderful.

Revo offers rally racing (the kind where an announcer barks out the length and grade of every turn) in the first- and third-person perspective. The game strikes a decent balance between realism and arcade-style play; cars have to be skillfully driven, but stuff like car damage and decreasing functionality has been omitted.

With Revo, Sega plans to emphasize graphics and gameplay in equal measure. Taking a page from MotorStorm's book, Revo will include deformable environments. Part of the game demonstration saw a representative from Sega's Driving Studio taking one of the game's cars and performing multiple donuts with it on a muddy track. Appropriate amounts of muck are kicked up in a car's wake, and the debris oftentimes settles on a car's bumpers, fenders, etc. Even more impressive: Cut enough dirt and a hole will begin to fill with water, creating mud. In gameplay, this means players can create ruts and divots in the road, using them to increase their car's speed and possibly impair the progress of other racers.



More real-time mud slinging... Lovin' it!

"The game strikes a decent balance between realism and arcade-style play; cars have to be skillfully driven, but stuff like car damage and decreasing functionality has been omitted."

The game offers a host of courses and environments to race in. One of the most impressive courses began on rough gravel and progressed from wet pavement to mud, from mud to slush, and then slush to full snow. Each terrain, of course, has its own peculiarities, and cars will handle differently on each. Neat effects such as melting snow on a car's bumpers and hood only serve as delightful punctuation marks.

Sega had almost nothing to say about the game's campaign mode. It will sport the game's advanced racing artificial intelligence, which is possibly just a fancy way of suggesting the game's computer controlled cars won't attempt, say, to make unfettered sharp turns on snow. Players can expect a series of championship races, and the majority of new cars and tracks will be made available by conquering this mode.

In addition to tilt control for the game's PlayStation 3 version, Sega will be offering feedback steering wheel support for all versions. Online gameplay supports up to six players, and two racers can compete against one another in splitscreen.

Sega Rally Revo — Arcade

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation 3
Developer	Sega Driving Studio
Publisher	Sega
Available	Winter 2007

Haze

An FPS you can OD on

words Greg Orlando

heed well the words of former first lady Nancy Reagan: Just say no to drugs—unless, of course, you're a futuristic warrior in the first-person shooter Haze. In that case, by all means, dose up, baby.

In Haze, you play a soldier for a vaguely sinister corporate army and, as befitting the action in a first-person shooter, you get to shoot many, many people in the face. The key difference here is that you get to shoot people in the face while under the influence. Soldiers in this vaguely futuristic world will have access to Nectar, a drug developed to enhance human reaction time and performance. While on Nectar, you'll have access to powers such as Nectar-focus, foresight, and perception as well as melee blast, which enhances a soldier's battlefield capabilities by augmenting his ability to hit targets, see potential sources of danger, and do increased damage by physically striking foes with a weapon.

This drug trip can be spoiled by an overdose; too much of a good thing is a very bad thing indeed. Excessive use of the drug (enemies will also attempt to induce overdoses) will send your soldier or his allies into an uncontrollable frenzy. Which is exactly what Mrs. Reagan was warning you about...

Haze	preview
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Developer	Free Radical
Publisher	Ubisoft
Available	TBA 2007

Fantastic Four

Super friends

words Heather Campbell

With a few weeks left before the world finds out whether Rise of the Silver Surfer is a better film than Fantastic Four, Take 2 is keeping their fingers crossed. It's pretty common knowledge that the first Four film was disappointing. Many fans balked at the announcement of a follow-up, but as the ad campaign spread, we forgot about the past and began to look forward to the future.

Rise of the Silver Surfer for the 360 and the PS3 was developed independently of the Wii, DS, and PSP versions, for a truly next-gen experience. Focusing on cooperative, team play, FF:RotSS promises to expand on the film's plotline by including episodes from the Marvel Comics series, meaning our foursome has the chance to fight Red Ghost, Terrax and Super Skrull. The developers stressed that the heroes start out with their powers intact, because this isn't an origin story. Still, the abilities can be improved as the game progresses

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	preview
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Developer	Visual Concepts
Publisher	Take 2 Interactive
Available	June 15, 2007

—meaning that Sue will be very invisible by the time you complete the title.

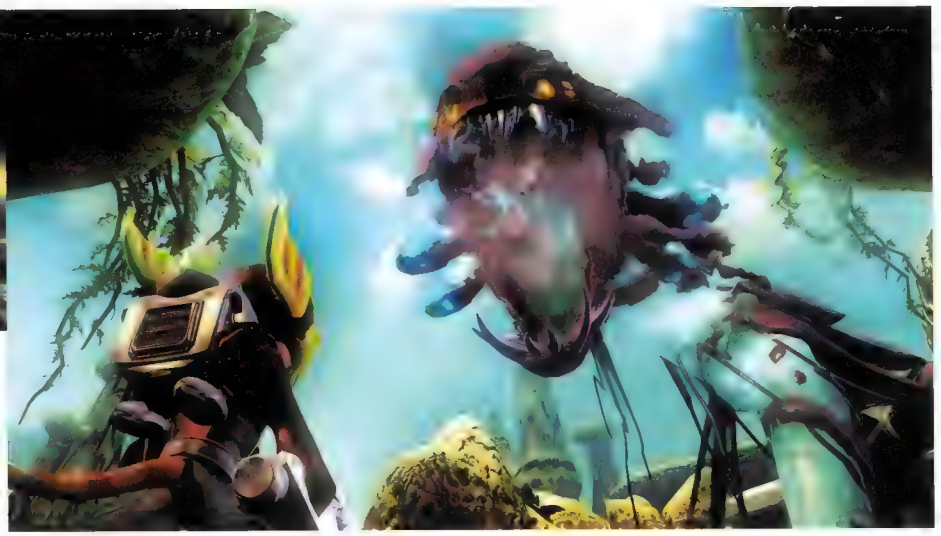
By the way, in-room multiplayer is always a little bit more fun than online play, and pounding through the completely destructible, branching environments got me excited about pizza parties with my friends in weeks to come.

Check the rock-hard abs. He must work out.

SONY GAMERS' DAY 2007

So now that E3 is dead... or at least moving to a smaller venue with smaller intentions this July in Santa Monica... Wait, it sure does still feel like May was a month of E3, with Sony's camp moving the festivities to San Diego to spill out a huge batch of what's coming in 2007 for the PS3, PS2 and PSP. Executives were on hand to talk about how the PS3 is something to get excited about, and we learned how many elephants could be suspended from the ceiling of the new $6-million motion capture studio. But more importantly, one strong game after another was shown; PS3 is finally about to gather a proper head of steam...

words Brady Fiechter



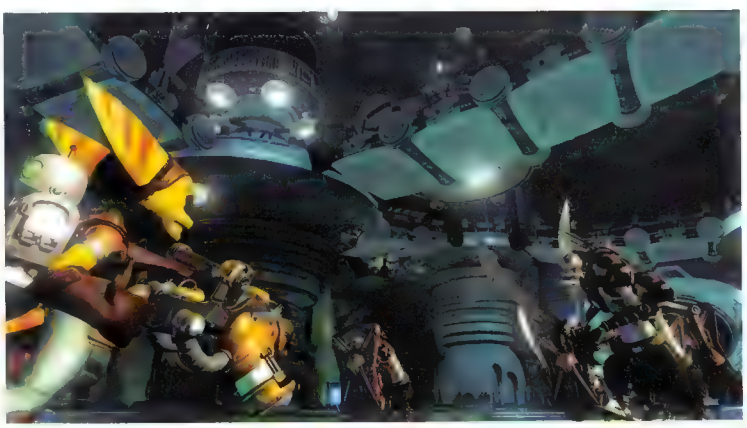
PS3 Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction

Developer: Insomniac **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** Fall

Brian Allgeier, creative director at Insomniac, is quick to point out that the Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction demo has a long ways to go before it properly reflects what the design team wants in its final adventure. Whatever this fifth installment in the series ends up becoming—and from this fan's perspective, that fortunately will not be combat-centric like the half-baked Gridlocked—it's already one of the most impressive offerings Sony had on display (my personal bias puts it way at the top).

The game is returning to the more platform-intensive leanings of the original Ratchet & Clank and, concerning the combat, an entirely new set of weapons is being introduced. While the team intentionally limited the scope of destruction afforded by the various weapons before, here they're allowing for more doomsday-style possibilities. But after moving into gloomier territory with Resistance: Fall of Man, Allgeier demonstrated that Insomniac isn't forgetting the light humor the series is known for with the reveal of one of the game's many new gadgets, called the Grooveatron. I believe the Grooveatron is the first weapon of its type where a garish dance light sends its illuminating glow over the enemy, hypnotizing them to groove as you decide what to do next.

Pointing out such graphical details as the fact that Ratchet's face contains almost as many joints as his entire model on PS2, Allgeier frames his demoing of the game with an emphasis on how much the team learned from Resistance from a technical standpoint. Apparently the engine has been dramatically overhauled, but whatever new trimmings Insomniac brought to this latest project on paper, my eye saw an incredible visual landscape in motion. Initial impression is that Ratchet's world is familiar, but the level of animation, color dimension and background detailing blended to create a canvas more film-like than game. I really appreciate the aesthetic sensibilities Insomniac captures, and this new PS3 toolshop is enough to get big fans excited before the finer gameplay details eventually emerge.



Folklore

Developer: Game Republic **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** October

I don't often get to be surprised in this industry any more, but that rare surprise came in the gorgeous form of Folklore, an action-adventure from the makers of Genji.

Folklore is a gem in waiting for gamers who truly appreciate just how distinctly different a Japanese game can be from the western design sensibilities. I have no problem calling it the most visually interesting game Sony had on display, but more for its dreamlike use of colors and strangely wonderful creature designs than its raw technical achievement. Its world immediately excited my imagination, something that hasn't been happening a lot lately.

Folklore takes place inside a plane between the waking and the dreaming, where the quiet town of Doolin exists as a portal to this fairy tale existence. A girl named Ellen is drawn here after receiving a message from her mother—who died years ago. As Ellen enters Doolin, a journalist named Keats is drawn to the same place, responding to a cry for help from... Ellen's mother?

Both characters are pulled into interweaving conflicts, searching for answers as they interact with dozens of allies and foes. You intermittently take control of both characters, who journey forth without the aid of traditional weapons. Instead, the spirit of the monsters are ripped from their souls with a flick of the Sixaxis; the effect is very cool, sort of like a Ghostbuster's vacuuming. Each of the monsters, called folks, give you their signature powers once absorbed, assigned to the individual buttons on the controller. Around 100 folks will be encountered, but you can only hold on to four a time, casting them forth to use as an offensive.

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

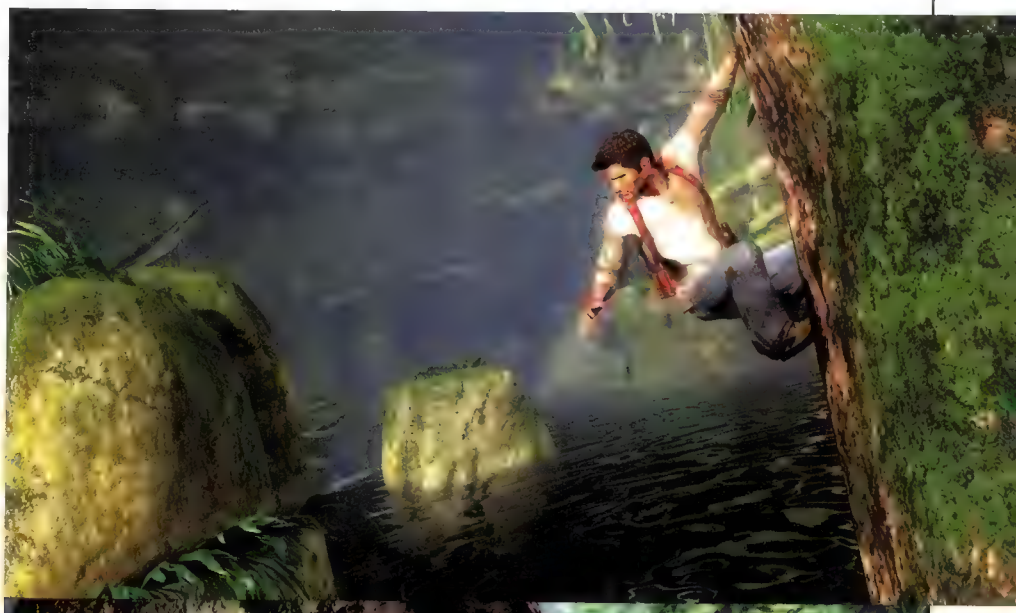
Developer: Naughty Dog **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** November

Nathan Drake, the treasure hunter at the center of Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, isn't some larger-than-life bad-ass who looks lifted out of the stylized pages of a comic book or inspired by the more esoteric corners of fantasy. He's you or me, filtered through the lens of a Hollywood action movie. The first time you see the game in motion, it might actually take some getting used to; there's a connection to reality that is quite startling when detailed on this new PS3 hardware.

In a scene drafted out of the Indiana Jones script, the game begins with a dramatic crash landing on a jungle-thick island—populated, of course, by bad guys with bad intentions and guns to prove it. You are just as good as they are at using those guns, and there's never a lack of ammunition as long as you keep the killing going and sweep up all the dropped goodies. This is an action game, an adventure game, a platformer, an interactive summer blockbuster, a... well, it seems to be a lot of things, set in a spectacularly detailed setting that feels present day and straight off a movie set.

Drake does a lot of exploring and jumping and climbing, over waterfalls and up vines and across logs and through giant jungle rock structures. It's still too early to start making sweeping assumptions and comparisons—the game does indeed forge a very unique identity—but a good smile came to my face as I kept on thinking I was getting a game with a little Tomb Raider blood in its veins.

There's a ton of stuff going on in Uncharted: Drake's Fortune (and no loading), both in gameplay and presentation, and the way it's all stitched together is remarkably high level. The animation is especially worth noting, both on the enemies and Drake, who shows a wide array of emotion when he's caught in a tight situation. The game kept revealing more riches every time I ran through the demo, beginning to get a better sense of the ambitious vision Naughty Dog is going for.



LittleBigPlanet

Developer: Media Molecule **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** Winter

It's been a while since I've been able to slap someone over and over in a video game, which is no doubt part of the immense joy I kept feeling while toying around with LittleBigPlanet. And how about the emotional reactions the characters display, moping and smiling and high-fiving!

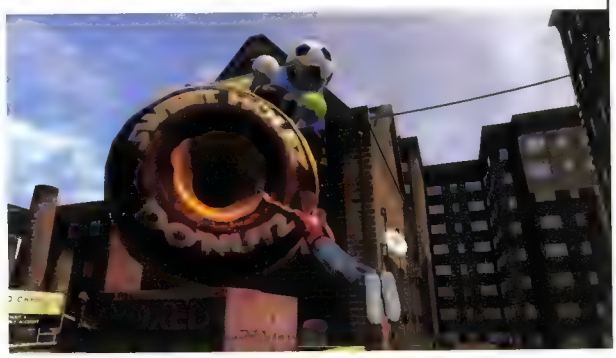
One of the objectives the game promotes is simply interacting with a group of your friends as you playfully spar with the far-too-cute characters that can be tailored to your creative liking. When it's time to get down to traditional gaming business, levels can be built from scratch too, and when you're happy with your creation, anyone can be invited along for the platform/puzzle-solving ride. Teamwork is important, with a surprising emphasis on a physics model that you normally wouldn't expect to impact a game like this.

LittleBigPlanet may not be much more than a small teaser at the moment, but the few minutes it shows is so attractive and infectious that you can't help but champion it as a success.

Pain

Developer: Idol Minds **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** Fall

In a society where suffering rules, why not make a game where you can delight in the suffering of a virtual character crashing through windows, snapping off edges of a blunt objects, or laying the smack down on a mime? In Pain, you even get to spank a monkey if that's your thing. But mostly, the object is to launch your character into an obstacle course of hazards and see how much damage can be done. There's talk of future downloadable content including the likeness of real-world personalities.



Heavenly Sword

Developer: Ninja Theory **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** September

Heavenly Sword hasn't given up much more about its intentions in the year since it debuted at E3; the easy God of War comparisons continue. In the brief demo, the main character Nariko is put through wild scenes of destruction, which require timed button inputs to avoid falling off snapping ropes and leap off mounds of falling debris. Stretches of what amounted to interactive cinemas opened up into arena-style combat, during which Nariko wields a set of whirling blades in the face of multiple groups of enemies, performing all sorts of acrobatic finishing moves and scintillating combos. More please.

Devil May Cry 4

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom **Available:** October

The move away from Devil May Cry 3 is a welcome change for the series—away from that damned difficulty, and away from the more restricted environments. Or at least it seemed to be in this explosive demo. Devil May Cry 4 recalled the first game in the series, with more exploration and indoor/outdoor transitions. The action is what you'd expect from Devil May Cry, with long strings of combos propelling the demon smackdowns. A big addition is the use of what looks like a magical grappling move, which launches Nero (who's awfully Dante-like) from ledge to ledge and can be used as an offensive.

PS3

The Bigs

Developer: Visual Concepts **Publisher:** 2K Sports **Available:** July

This one really caught my eye, as it's been a long time since a good arcade-style baseball game's been out. The Bigs doesn't go crazy with its breaking of the rules, exaggerating in some areas, staying true to the game in others—and generally just taking a more simplistic approach to the game. The controls are easy and feel super-responsive, giving you much more of a sense of power than a sim. The pacing is quick and high-energy. You'll have access to embellishments like turbo meters and super charges, and depending on your performance, can piss off players and send them into a rage. In one fun minigame, called HomeRun Pinball, you get to knock balls into Times Square, scoring points for destruction. Props to 2K Sports for toying with their baseball heritage!

PS3

SOCOM Confrontation

Developer: Slant Six Games **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** November

SOCOM's under reconstruction, and it's a lot more than a next-gen facelift. Like Warhawk, it's online multiplayer only—32 players can join in—and will be available as a dowloadable title, with a release on Blu-ray to follow. In the presentation to unveil the game, the action looked like what you'd expect from the series, with Navy SEALS sneaking through a Middle-Eastern city. There's an emphasis being placed on smaller areas that support more detail and denser tactical possibilities, and without vehicles this time out, on-foot skirmishes maintain a very specific gameplay track.

PS3

Conan

Developer: Nihilistic Software **Publisher:** THQ **Available:** 2008

Drawn from the novels by Robert E. Howard, the Conan video game is, as you'd expect, an action-heavy experience. In combat, Conan is given over a 100 types of attacks, which can lean on the more graphic side as you snap off heads and rip apart limbs in a shower of blood. The levels are being constructed to offer a lot of interaction, scattered with various objects that can be used as weapons. Inspired by the works of artist Frank Frazetta, who painted the covers used in Conan's paperback novels in the '60s, the developers are bringing an extremely stylized and rather menacing look of fantasy to the game.

PSP

Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow

Developer: Bend Studios **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** Fall

Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow returns with Gabe Logan and his stealth/action tactics, adding in a few new ideas like mini-games and blind-fire combat scenarios. The 360 degree underwater areas looked very cool, typifying what was a visually strong game for the PSP.

PSP God of War: Chains of Olympus

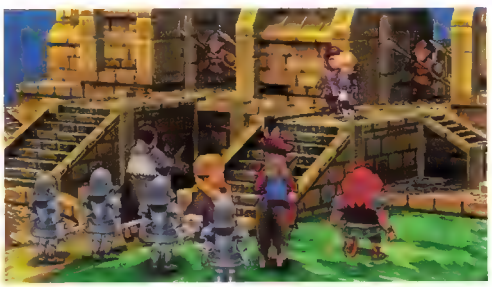
Developer: Ready At Dawn **Publisher:** SCEA **Available:** November

There's still work to be done to get the control scheme ironed out, but if looks were everything, God of War: Chains of Olympus would have no problem standing tall next to the PS2 games in the series. The visual communication of awe and vicious power remain on the PSP. God of War II director Cory Barlog is on board as creative director as well.

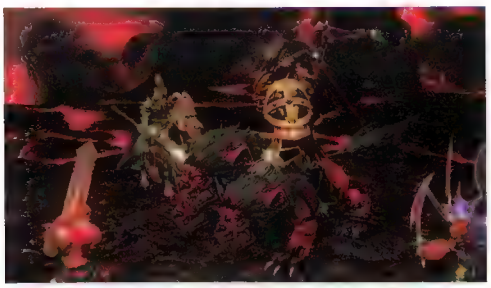
PSP SOCOM USNS

PSP Pursuit Force Extreme

PSP Jean D Arc



PS3 Eye of Judgement



PSP Dungeon and Dragons Tactics

PSP Final Fantasy II

PSP Swat: Target Liberty

PS3 Stranglehold

Naruto Clash of Ninja Revolution

Naruto is Wii bound!

words Heather Campbell

In Japan, Naruto has aged three years and is in a new costume. In America, we're battling it out in the old orange and blue jumpsuit, progressing through episodes with Cartoon Network. That means that Naruto games for the Wii have to be retro-engineered to satisfy American fans. That's okay! With the engine in place, the combat will be the same, even if the characters look different.

Clash of Ninja Revolution is an original Wii fighting game based on the Japanese Naruto: Shippuden Wii brawler from Japan. With 14+ available characters, every fan has someone to fight with. What sets this game apart from its Gamecube ancestors is the unique play of the Wiimote, which is well suited for spinning Rasengans and other motion-ready ninjitsu techniques.

Also included in the title are three mini games—the most simply exciting of which is Shuriken throwing (below). Place the Wiimote in the palm of your hand and swipe your other across the A button, and suddenly, it's like you're in an old action film, tossing throwing stars at enemies. And just when you thought they'd run out of things to do with the Wiimote!

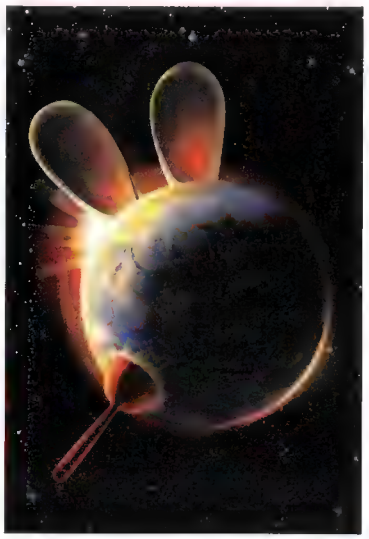
Naruto: Clash of Ninja Revolution	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Eighting
Publisher	D3Publisher of America
Available	Fall 2007

Rayman Raving Rabbids 2

Can't stop the breeding

words Greg Orlando

Those wascally wabbits are back for more minigame mayhem, and life is, once again, worth living. Here, it's great fun to shake the Wii remote to have a cute bunny eat carrots and then hock a big carrot juice loogie into a moving cup below. And by "great fun," of course, we mean totally gross. And great fun.



Rayman Raving Rabbids 2	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Ubisoft Montpellier
Publisher	Ubisoft
Available	Fall

Assassin's Creed

Too good for words, but here's a few anyway...

words Greg Orlando

Ubisoft has graciously invited players to relive all the barbarism and savagery of the Third Crusade. As the assassin Altair, players get to kill lots of people while avoiding capture. This third-person adventure is not unlike a day at the beach, just with a lot more dead bodies and hurt feelings.

Assassin's Creed	preview
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Available	Winter 2007

Space Station Tycoon

This may come in handy...

words Greg Orlando

Space Station Tycoon offers goofy fun as players build and manage complexes in outer space. Voodoo Chicken, for example, wants a space station built to kill its visitors. Players can lure space travelers to the station and then overload its power generator. Voodoo Chicken demands its victims be extra-crispy.

Space Station Tycoon	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Wahoo Studios
Publisher	Namco-Bandai
Available	August

So, when can we move in?

2007 blizzard worldwide invitational

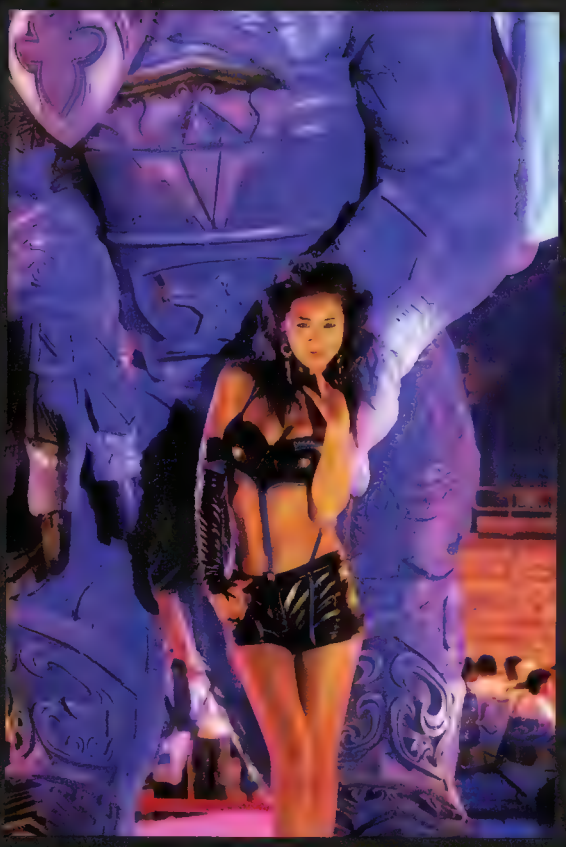
words Nick Des Barres

The big news at Blizzard's Worldwide Invitational in Seoul, South Korea was obviously the announcement of the long-awaited StarCraft II (see following page), but for me the experience of a somehow familiar, yet wholly alien gaming culture was the main attraction. Who hasn't heard about Korea's love affair with online PC games–especially Blizzard's 1998 StarCraft–over the years? Pro gaming tournaments with the razzle-dazzle of heavyweight title matches, players dying from exhaustion after marathon 48-hour online battles, real-world murder over the loss of virtual items...the stories are as varied as they are fascinating.

Nothing, of course, tells the story so much as being there. My only cultural exposure to Korea prior to arriving in Seoul for Blizzard's event was a smattering of Chan-wook Park movies, a few manhwa, and a handful of Korean-developed fantasy games...perhaps not the best preparation for the slick, ultra-tidy South Korean capital and its highly advanced gaming culture. If you thought the Japanese were hardcore, you have no idea: It's absolutely safe to say Korea has the highest ratio of gamers to civvies in the entire world. Sitting among thousands of Korean gamers and hearing them roar in unison as the StarCraft II logo came on the screen was truly a surreal experience; take any significant game announcement in recent memory and magnify the drama a hundredfold. Of course, images speak louder than words, so without further ado: The 2007 Blizzard Worldwide Invitational, in pictures.

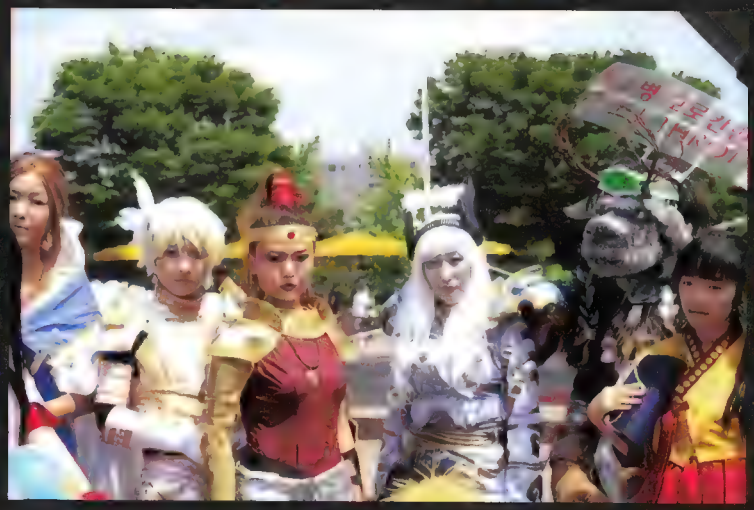
A true only-in-Korea moment: Fangirls fawning over a high-ranked professional player.

Just as predicted, StarCraft II is revealed...



Say *annoyang haseyo*: The language of hot is universal.

Hot Chicks

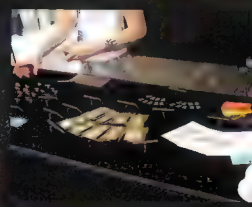


Cosplay

Cosplay, Korean style. You might be wondering why there are only three identifiable Blizzard characters here, mixed in with the Narutos and Luffys. Don't worry, we were just as confused.

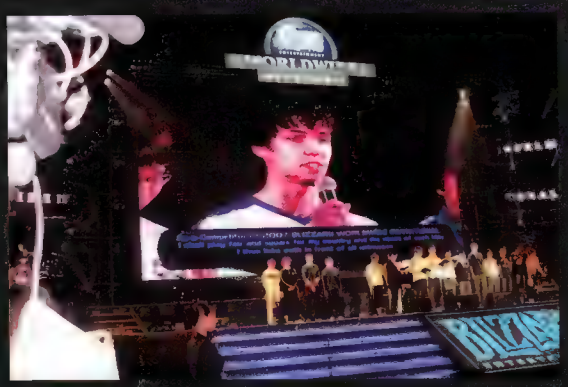
Perhaps taking a cue from Square-Enix's marketing in Japan, Blizzard offered countless WoW and SC trinkets for the faithful at not one, but two kiosks—indoor and outdoor. The maquette of Tychus Findlay from the just-announced StarCraft II was especially badass.

Blizzard Shop



Electronic games weren't the only attraction at the Invitational. There were also various carny games dressed up with a WoW theme: Take a rodeo ride on a mount, fire balls through hoops or build a structure as a team for the chance to win lovely Blizzard swag.

Real-Life Quests



Tournaments

StarCraft, WarCraft III, the World of Warcraft card game...you name it. If it's a competitive Blizzard game, there were tournaments at the Invitational. Though many countries were represented, nearly all the winners were Korean. Natch.

Blizzard spared no expense in bringing the hottest K-Pop acts to their Invitational. In fact, a huge contingent of high school girls at the SCII announcement seemed to be there for the express purpose of seeing Maximum Crew live.

Korean Pop Stars

play
Staff "Round up"

Ninja Gaiden Sigma 056
Overlord 060
Resident Evil 4 (Wii) 062
Hot Shots Tennis 063
DiRT 064
Call of Juarez 065
Harry Potter Order of the Phoenix 066
Monster Hunter 2 Freedom 069

Reviews

July 2007

Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Resident Evil 4: Wii Edition
p. 062

The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Tecmo's Nite Out

Tokyo Drift

words Nick Des Barres / Dai Kohama

And the crowd goes wild.

Most game companies in Japan's staid business environment host their press conferences at safe, sane venues—event halls, convention centers, company headquarters. Perhaps at their most edgy, they might spring for a *hotel*. But Tecmo, whose public face is Team Ninja's Tomonobu Itagaki—a man who most certainly wears his sunglasses at night, and with *pride*—will adhere to no such trite conventions. Nay, Tecmo instead opts to host their event at one of the hottest nightclubs in ultra-fashionable Shibuya, Club Camelot. Complete with slinky waitresses dressed as Victorian maids serving heady mixed drinks of every persuasion, the venue was perhaps the perfect place for Tecmo's own mini-E3.

Team Ninja may be all the rage among the kids nowadays, but this event proved that Tecmo is much more than just The Itagaki Show: We were treated to the debut of four non-Team Ninja projects, as well as the announcement of an all-new studio to be headed up by Keisuke Kikuchi of Fatal Frame series fame, Team Tachyon. While Tecmo has always had numerous internal teams, the public naming of one to stand alongside the world-renowned Team Ninja would seem to suggest big things.

Team Tachyon's first game will be Project Rygar (see box-out), for the Wii. Following that will be a title aimed squarely at America, one that had the gathered crowd of game journos cheering raucously: Tecmo Bowl. With no announced platform and only a logo shown, it remains to be seen where the game shows up, and whether or not it can capture the pure, simple fun of the 8- and 16-bit versions in this era of hyper-realistic rah-rah USA sports games.

While Rygar and Tecmo Bowl were certainly the highest-profile announcements at the event (other than the already-completed Ninja Gaiden ∑–see the following pages), Tecmo's long-awaited foray into the DS market was represented by Monster Rancher DS and DS Kyotaro Nishimura Suspense. Neither have been confirmed as of yet for the American market, but with the success of the original, long-dormant Monster Rancher series and Ace Attorney/Hotel Dusk-style adventure games respectively, both would seem to have a shot.

The Monster Rancher series was always defined by its gimmick of loading CDs from which the game would fashion new monsters. The DS title will follow this tradition by creating monsters from GameBoy Advance cartridges, though it will also allow input by stylus and mic. Kyotaro Nishimura Suspense is an original story by the acclaimed Japanese mystery author of the same name, and sports a lengthy (and surprisingly high-budget) quest interspersed with shorter, five-minute mini-game-style deduction sequences.

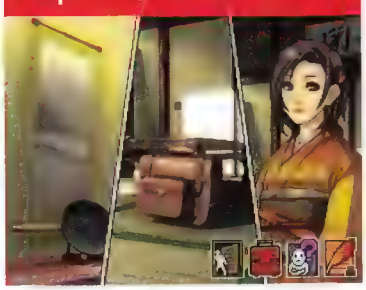
Many expected that Tecmo would use its glitzy Nite Out '07 to announce Ninja Gaiden 2, but it was not to be... and that's just fine. Its debut would have overshadowed everything else Tecmo brought to play with, not least Ninja Gaiden Dragon Sword on DS. I'll be completely honest: I initially scoffed at the idea on a 3D Ninja Gaiden on DS, but after seeing it in motion I shut up real quick. All the alcohol, disco lights and curvy maids in the world couldn't dull the senses enough to detract from just how impressive this game already is, even in its incomplete form.

"Konbanwa, ladies. I have a Wiimote in my pocket–perhaps you'd care to reach in and play some Rygar?"

Rygar Project

I've always been a huge Rygar fan. From the long, languorous days whiled away with the coin-op at the local drug store, to levelling up endlessly against the robots in Lapis to beat the last boss in the NES version, to its massively underrated PS2 outing. I've been there. While next to nothing was revealed on the Wii game except this single piece of character art, Keisuke Kikuchi described Wiimote gameplay that will have the player whirling his or her arm around her head at breakneck speeds lasso-style to manipulate Rygar's trademark shield-on-a-chain, the Diskarmor. I could not be more pleased with this announcement (the graphics whore in me might have preferred a bit of PS360 action, but them's the breaks), though I can't help but be amused by the Kratos influence on Rygar circa 2007. Ears pierced? Check. Chains? Check. Goatee? Check. Monochrome skin tattoos? Check. *Attitude*? Check. It's a wonder our new Rygar isn't bald.

DS Kyotaro Nishimura Suspense



Monster Rancher DS

Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword

Team Ninja work their magic on DS

words Nick Des Barres

Team Ninja on the DS? Has the world gone mad? Perhaps...but this is the kind of mad I drink up like liquid cotton candy. Tomonobu Itagaki's rockstar swaggering and constant put-downs against competitors can sometimes make his games hard to like, but even the most die-hard Team Ninja hater would recognize the brilliance at work in the cutely titled Ninja Gaiden Dragon Sword.

For one thing, it's the first character-based action game entirely controlled via stylus...and it *works*. Since the control is truly paradigm-shattering (or is that paradigm-*creating*?), allow me to provide a detailed breakdown: Tapping on Ryu and dragging the stylus moves him. Tapping on an enemy will throw a shuriken in their direction. Drawing a quick horizontal line results in a horizontal sword slash, and a vertical one likewise. A double-tap causes Ryu to jump, and a further double-tap results in a double-jump. The only actual button utilized is for blocking. I know, I know—it sounds ridiculous...but it works almost better than it has any right to.

Dragon Sword feels *immediate* in a way no other game I've ever played has. It may have a bit of a learning curve, but once you get in the groove the game feels like nothing else, not even Ninja Gaiden/NG Black. Structurally, however, it does take its cues from the Xbox game: The same orb system and save pillars are in place, and although we're unsure whether or not the game will be divided into chapters or have a continuous world, the maps displayed on the left screen (you hold your DS book style) would seem to indicate an exploration element will be present.

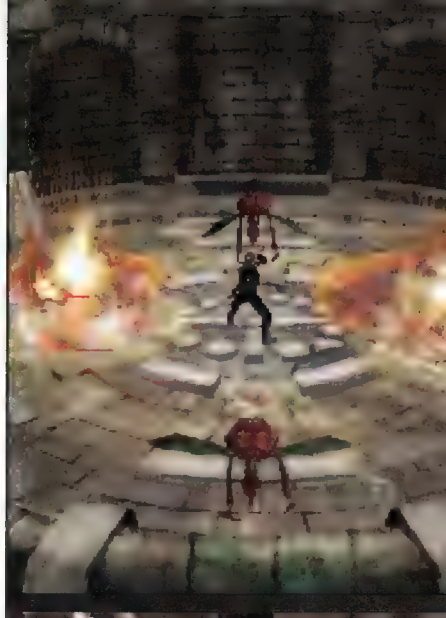
Graphically, the game is a wonder. Sure, the backgrounds are pre-rendered, but the model and texture fidelity surpasses anything seen on DS to date. Itagaki even joked at the event that the Dragon Sword will ship with an extra graphics board in the DS cartridge, and you'd almost believe him. Many have called the game's graphics "PSP-level," and though I won't go that far, I will say it looks something like a high-end PSOne game, and Team Ninja's trademark motion work has a lot to do with it.

Ninja Gaiden Dragon Sword is still quite a ways from finished, but I'll go ahead and say it's going to be absolutely awesome when it comes out sometime late this year. It's as if the promise of DS's touchscreen has finally been realized, and I say that without hyperbole. Well...maybe a little. Hey, a dab of hyperbole never hurt Team Ninja before, right?

"Itagaki even joked at the event that the Dragon Sword will ship with an extra graphics board in the DS cartridge..."

If you think this is the best-looking 3-D DS game ever, Tomonobu Itagaki agrees with you.

Make like a Buddhist monk and trace elegant Siddham script on your DS screen to cast Ninpo.



Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword	
System(s)	DS
Developer	Team Ninja
Publisher	Tecmo
Available	TBA

Interview with Tomonobu Itagaki

words Nick Des Barres

play: Team Ninja is a developer that has long prided itself on tech, and famously stepped over the more popular PlayStation 2 to develop for Xbox simply because it was more powerful. So why go to DS?
Tomonobu Itagaki: We didn't "go" to DS. We're still on 360. We've been working on Xbox platforms for five or six years now, and we finally got a break in our schedule, so we're thinking of handhelds as just one more challenge.

It's safe to say the strength of the DS is in 2D. Did you ever consider making a 2D Ninja Gaiden in the vein of the NES classics?
Not at all. Anyone can make that kind of game. This is Team Ninja. If we don't show you how Team Ninja would utilize the DS, it's pointless.

The DS mainly appeals to children and non-traditional gamers, especially in Japan. How are you balancing classic Team Ninja difficulty with market considerations?
People who enjoyed the Ninja Gaiden I made will be able to appreciate the difficulty level of Dragon Sword. I don't think children will have any problems with it...actually, if you asked me whether or not children were less skilled than adults I'd say no. To the contrary, I think adult gamers are getting weaker.

So you don't think we'll see gaggles of Japanese kids running around with their Ryus sporting pink ribbons.
No. That idea was a one-shot thing...it won't ever come back. By the way, when we first made the pink ribbon I thought it was far too short, I had them make it a lot longer [laughs]. Anyway, it was supposed to be like a present from Ayane, and Ayane isn't in this game. There's a new heroine.

An entirely stylus-controlled, fast-paced action game is very bold. Have you run into problems with the player's hand obscuring the screen? How are you compensating for it?
First of all, I would not have even considered this game without touchscreen control. I wanted something with very direct control over the character...something like the touchpad on a laptop. The DS's strong point is its ability to play games by actually touching the screen. Therefore, the problem of the player's hand covering up part of the screen is unavoidable, but for that very reason the game is made to be held book-style, to minimize the area one's hand can conceal.

A lot of developers seem to struggle with how to use the second screen. Did you find this a challenge?
A screen is for presentation. Just think of it as presentation on two screens instead of one. That's all there is to it.

Was there any experimentation with a full 3D system, or did you start with prerendered backgrounds from the outset? I'm curious if the viewpoint is fixed for technical reasons or if a moving camera caused control issues.
You want it to look pretty, don't you? That's why the backgrounds are prerendered. That's all.

Dragon Sword represents the first time Team Ninja has gone with hand-drawn, anime-style presentation. Why the change?
With this hardware, I simply decided that hand-drawn artwork would be more appropriate than CG to display facial expressions and involve the player in the story.

One thing that intrigued me about the demo was the Siddham script the player has to enter while using Ninpo [ed. note: an ancient Indian script preserved in Japan for the purpose of copying Buddhist sutras. Elsewhere it has been completely replaced by Devanagari and other scripts]. Siddham is very much a part of Japanese culture, but probably unfamiliar to Western gamers. Is it going to stay the same for the US release?
That won't be changed. Inputting Chinese characters would have been too difficult, not to mention the fact that Asian users would have an advantage. Likewise, it would be ridiculous entering an "F" to use fire Ninpo, or something. I think the Siddham script is a good middle ground, and a good match for the mysterious ninja arts.

Have you had to tone down Team Ninja's traditional eroticism for DS? The new heroine's wardrobe is a far cry from that of characters like Rachel.
Perhaps I'm including some erotic elements that are *only* possible on the DS... just kidding [laughs].

Is Dragon Sword a side-story gaiden—no pun intended—or part of series canon?
It's canon. It takes place between Ninja Gaiden 1 and 2.

Ninja Gaiden 2? Can we expect an announcement soon?
Well...I'm working on various projects. But I can't really say anything about them yet [laughs].

Can we get some confirmation on those various projects? We've heard names for what seems like years, but know almost nothing about them. For instance, DOA: Code Cronos. Any progress?
On Code Cronos, we're still involved in a lot of gameplay prototyping. Prototyping is one of the most important things in game design. For instance, the reason Ninja Gaiden DS feels so good to play is because we did gameplay simulations for a long time before actually beginning hard development.

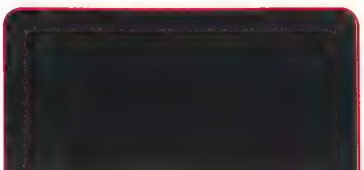
What about "Project Progressive"? We know even less about it than Code Cronos.
The Project Progressive staff are hard at work right now. By the way, it has nothing to do with Dead Or Alive.

You're known as possibly the single most outspoken Japanese developer, and your feelings toward Capcom and Namco are well known. If you say something nice about them, I'll donate $10 to charity...how about it?
First of all, you're totally mistaken if you think I don't like Capcom as a company. That's just a mistake. I don't dislike Namco, either...what I dislike is Tekken. Anyway, to answer your question, Namco makes good potstickers [ed. note: In Japan Namco owns a potsticker-themed Chinese restaurant chain].

Our time is up. Any final comments for your American fans?
If you're a series fan, this is main continuity story that will tie directly into Ninja Gaiden 2, so I hope you'll play Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword.

"First of all, I would not have even considered this game without touchscreen control..."

Team Ninja director Itagaki



Ninja Gaiden (Sigma)

The Ryu Hayabusa Mega Man II crossover we've been waiting for!!

words Casey Loe

Tecmo's glitzy Nite Out 07 was full of bright lights and loud music, but even the titzapoppin' maid girls couldn't draw our eyes away from the Ninja Gaiden Sigma kiosks. For unlike the maid girls, who were marred by questionable dentistry and poorly concealed sneers of contempt, Sigma (henceforth: ∑) seemed to have everything a gentleman could possibly desire: The stunning beauty of next-gen visuals combined with the substantial quest and refined play mechanics of one of the greatest games of the Xbox era. Also, breasts.

Several days later, after sobering up somewhat, our reviewable copy painted a slightly different picture. Team Ninja has clearly nailed the play mechanics (and the breast physics), but the graphics haven't been upgraded nearly as much as the team has lead us to believe. (See pages 44-45 of our May issue for such boasts as "we definitely have the top graphics on the PS3 right now.") Yes, I *know* the screenshots on this page look fantastic. The new character and enemy models really do look that good, but those are glamour shots with unrealistic camera angles, and you'll never see that level of detail at actual gameplay size. And yes, I agree that the downloadable demo of the first chapter looked nice, with its brighter color scheme and denser foliage in the outside areas. The second chapter looks good too, with maple leaves blowing in the wind, and a gorgeous new segment that takes place in a burning temple. The trouble is, Team Ninja pretty much gave up after that, and the remainder of the game has few graphical enhancements. The textures have been dutifully redrawn, but the simple, boxy geometry of the stages remains completely unchanged. ∑ has moments of beauty, like the Archives in the Monastery, but most of its environments are flat, empty, and noticeably last-gen.

Fortunately, none of that matters much. Ninja Gaiden is all about the gameplay, and ∑ feels better than ever. Running along a wall, doing a back flip and crossing your blades to scissor off some poor chump's head as you soar past? That will *never* get old. What makes Ninja Gaiden so satisfying is that you're in full control of Ryu's impressive arsenal of attacks at all times; this isn't the typical context-sensitive stuff designed to make button-mashers feel good about themselves.

You'll need that level of control to make it through Ninja Gaiden's famously challenging quest. Enemies are smart, aggressive, and even the grunts can pose a serious threat. But as you learn your foes' preferred tactics and master the more exotic moves in Ryu's repertoire, you'll find a way past every challenge. The game is tough but utterly fair, a model of how to make a game challenging without forcing players to memorize enemy placements or spreading save points excessively far apart. The original's bumpy difficulty curve has actually been smoothed over a bit in ∑; the early bosses have been made easier, and the later bosses a bit tougher. Purists may object, but this is probably the way it should have been all along.

Another welcome upgrade is the ability to use healing items with the D-Pad without having to pause the game. But the game's most glaring flaw has not been addressed at all: the dreadful camera system still causes confusing perspective shifts and often pushes Ryu or his foes off screen in the heat of battle. Fixing that should have been higher on the priority list.

If you've never had the pleasure of playing Ninja Gaiden before, ∑ is a must-buy title. But if you're a veteran of Ninja Gaiden or Ninja Gaiden Black, then the calculus becomes a bit more complex. Team Ninja has thrown in several treats for fans of the original, headlined by a playable Rachel, who can be used in three new story chapters and some of the unlockable content. Slow, deliberate, and throw-oriented, Rachel plays nothing like Ryu, and challenges even hardened Ninja Gaiden vets to learn something new. This makes her chapters a definite highlight, even though they don't feature any new environments—Rachel simply takes a different route through Ryu's stages.

Another nice upgrade is the Twin Katanas, a new Ryu weapon that is every bit as deep and fun as Ryu's classic blade or the Lunar staff from Ninja Gaiden Black (which is also in this one). Using the Twin Katanas forces you to revise your old combos and boss tactics, making old foes feel fresh again. (And they're extremely powerful, since they can be upgraded sooner than any other weapon.) There are also a few unexpected twists, including a few new areas (all very brief), a new boss or two, and the opportunity to battle Doku in Chapter 2 (replacing a cinema in which he beats you automatically). It's at least a full Hurricane Pack worth of content, but the $60 price tag may be asking a lot of Ninja Gaiden fans who have already bought the game twice.

While I'm underwhelmed by ∑'s visuals, the PlayStation 3 software library already has plenty of graphical showpieces. Substantial, refined games like this one are much more of a rarity, and if skimping on the visuals gets ∑ into our hands during the PS3's summer drought, it's a worthy trade-off. Team Ninja oversold the sizzle, but this is still one hell of a steak.

"If skimping on the visuals gets ∑ into our hands during the PS3's summer drought, it's a worthy trade-off."

If looks could kill Rachel wouldn't need to move

Ninja Gaiden ∑ score **8.5**

\+ An upgraded version of a spectacular game.

\- Not all that upgraded, though.

System(s)	PS3
Developer	Team Ninja
Publisher	Tecmo
Multi	None
ESRB Rating	Mature
Available	June 26

Overlord

Career of evil

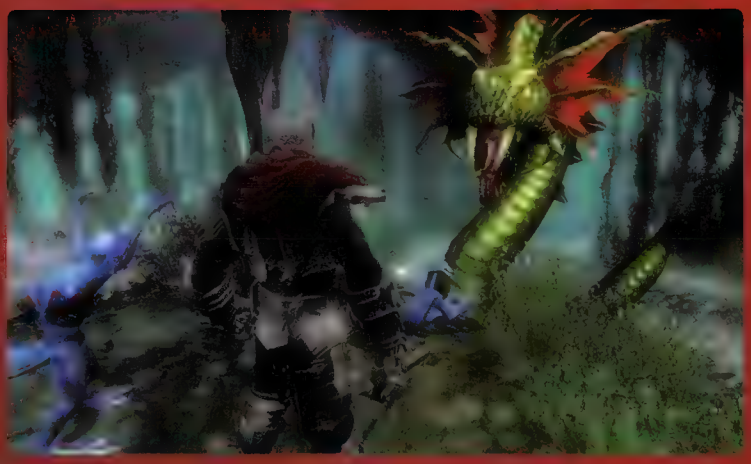
words Dave Halverson

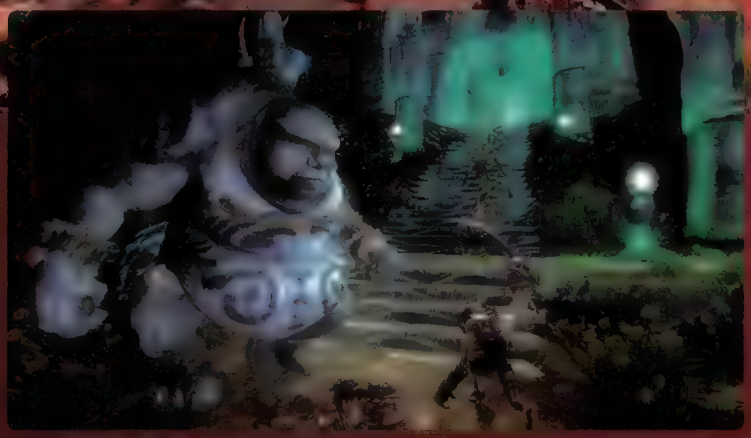
I've been playing video games every day (I know, pitiful) for some 15 years and although I rarely tire of them it's a select few that strike me as truly extraordinary—able to evoke that fondest of feelings when you're almost giddy with delight. I can recall only two such games that didn't possess a jump button—Fable and now Overlord. Growing up on everything from Black Sabbath, Kiss, Alice Cooper, and Led Zeppelin to Marilyn Manson, Lacuna Coil and Rob Zombie, I've always preferred the dark over the light...evil over good. I'm the guy that hopes Superman in all of his boy-next-door glory gets ripped in half by a bone dragon... I'd love to see Cartman decapitate Mickey Mouse or Godzilla turn Spider-man into a pool of guts and latex. My idea of a great comic is more along the lines of Lobo, Spawn, Hellboy, or Lady Death and I live for great gothic adventures like 300. When it comes to wanton violence of the virtual kind it just feels good to be bad. If you too share such an affinity for the dark, Overlord—even

though it is technically a black comedy—is an absolute requisite game. Drop this magazine (temporarily) and go get it. While the game can be played on a kinder, gentler level if you so desire, the most fun, not to mention safest, route (who knows what happened to the old Overlord) is to please thy minions, and they like nothing more than the taste of flesh and wholesale destruction.

In one of the game's early missions, for instance, the people of Spree have had their food supply stolen by Halflings—nasty little runts—which you as Overlord are more than happy to retrieve while annihilating them with pleasure. So there you are at the portal, your minions holding up the massive stockpile of food… You can either return the food to the villagers or murder the ones stupid enough to tag along and keep it for yourself. Now that's what I call a no-brainer. Everything you pillage goes back to your tower… food, gold, equipment and so forth, which your wench (once you find her) then uses to renovate the place or to appease your lovely little servants. And a good wench she is—so pleased the more you ravage and horde. She even builds a scale replica of the place so that you can sample the goods before you spend your gold on upgrades.

The lay of the land most closely resembles Fable, although things are a bit more open, with action hinged on controlling your four minion classes: Noxious Greens to dissipate poison; Blues for water duty; Reds to extinguish and hurl fire; and Browns, the workhorses of the horde, who just love to jump on things and kill them when they're not smashing everything in sight to present to their master… "For you, master." Running low on health or magic? Visit a well spring and they're more than happy to end their vile little lives in your honor, diving in to imbue you with their essence. Where Overlord really shines is in its clever puzzle/action. In addition to the usual commands associated with strategy-action RPGs (attack, defend, or camp) Triumph has added a tasty ingredient of their own called sweeping, in which you can simply sweep (via the right analog) any class of minion into houses, caves, small spaces and corresponding terrain to activate switches, ransack, whatever, without harming any bystanders. Say you're in a field of bouncing sheep and their shepherd. You can sweep your minions towards the sheep (and there's nothing like the sight of browns murdering sheep) without killing the shepherd. Of course, I'll kill him myself anyways (the Overlord can swing a mighty axe and cast spells) but you get the gist. There are also many places the Overlord can't reach, so sweeping becomes key in opening his way. The puzzle-action gameplay, battling both the enemy and the elements, is simply tuned to perfection and the oh-so-spectacular bosses play like an orchestra of action and strategy.





"The puzzle-action gameplay, battling both the enemy and the elements, is simply tuned to perfection."

Overlord is simply delectable at every turn. Back at the tower your jester grovels and spews adoration in accordance with your most recent conquest no matter how many times you kick him to the floor; the analogous music is married to the action perfectly, and the scenery is simply awe-inspiring whether you're laying waste to fairytale creatures in the warm sunlight or slaying zombies in a misty graveyard…the perfect marriage of gothic action, fantasy, and bloodletting. Chinks in the armor? Well, I suppose the Overlord himself could be a bit more graceful and I'd like a free camera (you can't freely spin it, although a flick of the LT button positions it behind you instantly) and some of the peasants do repeat themselves far too often (so I kill them), but these are minor quibbles in an overall sea of wonderfully fulfilling and unique gameplay. Please, whatever you do, come out for this game. If this is Triumph's first pass I can only imagine what a sequel might bring. Don't make me sick my Browns on you.

Overlord score **9.0**

+ Like a breath of putrid air, Overlord is wonderfully unique, addictive, and fun, not to mention gorgeous, amazingly detailed and brilliantly paced.

- The big guy's not the nimblest and some of the peasants repeat themselves to nauseam.

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Triumph Studios
Publisher	Codemasters
Online/Multi	NA
Available	June 26
ESRB Rating	M

Resident Evil: Wii EDITION

Evil takes up new residence

words Brady Fiechter

Resident Evil: Wii Edition is presented in widescreen and progressive scan, and also contains the little extras like added costumes and bonus quests that made their way onto the PlayStation 2 version of Resident Evil 4. Big deal? You make the call. The progressive scan and widescreen is actually a big deal to this fan, but the real change here that will both disgust and delight in various degrees comes in the form of the Wiimote and Nunchuk control scheme. Initially I balked; you really have to get used to, and might never get used to, panning the screen with the analog to change Leon's perspective while moving the target reticule with the Wiimote. The combination of the two never feels completely natural, but then again, the traditional control scheme on the GameCube rubbed some people the wrong way too. By the end of the game, I appreciated the different approach to aiming and firing, enjoying the new way of playing one of my favorite games; it's just that… well, Resident Evil 4 was not designed for the Wii, and you feel it as you play.

But all that out of the way, Resident Evil: Wii Edition exists as one of the great experiences in gaming. Playing it again, I'm even further struck by the remarkable visual design of it all. There is a feeling of a real place of dread and mystery, a sense of belonging as much as interacting. The artistic and the technical combine with an hypnotic elegance. While you can point out the tricks and holes in the overall tapestry, it's the way it all comes together that impresses me and compels me more than any game I've played—and yes, to my eyes, even on PS3 or Xbox 360.

Resident Evil 4 has a powerful understanding of the language of games. It knows just when to push buttons with action and tension, when to let the imagery do the work, how to integrate classic gameplay—I love that there's still item collection and management—with modern, filmic influences. The presentation is extraordinary, but the layers of what draws us most firmly to gameplay are so skillfully applied.

The enemies appear creepily alive, and while they aren't going about any special AI routines, it's their subtle movement, animation and form that fuel the engagement. That they are large and imposing, terrifically designed, certainly makes a difference. You could find fault with the plodding way Leon faces them in battle, but in that same breath, it is the tension created that is exactly what the designers were looking for.

This is not a game without annoyances. It tries too hard to be cool with some of the action and story cuts, and the dialogue can be silly and lazy. And do we still need to shoot exploding barrels? There are so many qualities about Resident Evil 4 (Wii Edition) that tower above ordinary games, the moments of breakdown become harmless static. Resident Evil 5 has too much to live up to.

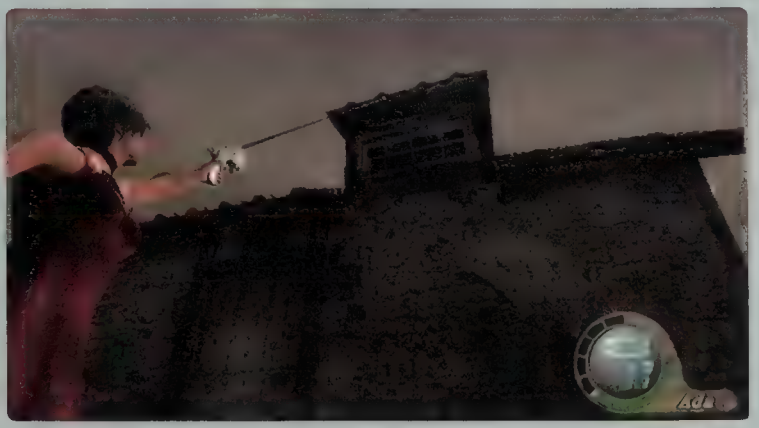
Resident Evil: Wii Edition — score **9.5**

\+ An artistic and design triumph. The tension and mystery the game develops terrifically compels.

\- Brain-dead dialogue. Wii control really is hit-or-miss.

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	Mature
Available	June

"Resident Evil 4 has a powerful understanding of the language of games."



Hot Shots Tennis

You're gonna 40 love it!

words Dave Halverson

There are precious few variables that define a good tennis game versus a bad tennis game—the rest is just window dressing. As little more than the evolution of Pong when you get right down to it, their value lies squarely on technique and game dynamics. How natural is the animation in relation to the placement on the court? How responsive are the finer details of the game such as slices, lobs, and spins? How's the serving? Is it by gauge or a more natural approach? Once you establish these parameters to the utmost for the given hardware, job two is to make it look great, whether you're going for fantasy like Hot Shots or reality like nearly everything else.

But reality can be tricky. To this day I have yet to see a "realistic" tennis game that even comes close to correctly representing the athletes. Modeling real people now that developers have the tools to do so is among the biggest challenge facing companies that endeavor to. Hot Shots, thankfully, does not. Hot Shots brings us slick, nicely modeled anime girls and guys playing on courts that range from hard court amidst cherry blossoms to sandy beaches. Actually the more you win as you assail rank the more courts you earn, along with outfits and umpires. The game looks great, really great, and plays even better. I love the multi-colored cues that imbue the court to define different types of shots, and the way tapping down on the right analog freezes the frame anytime, but most of all I love how the characters move and animate on the court. The unlockable fantasy elements such as "offbeat rules" are cool too.

"The game looks great, really great, and plays even better."

Bottom line, as with all the Hot Shots games (I have had enough golf though, thanks for the change Sony) Hot Shots Tennis is big on fun, end of story.

Hot Shots Tennis score **8.5**

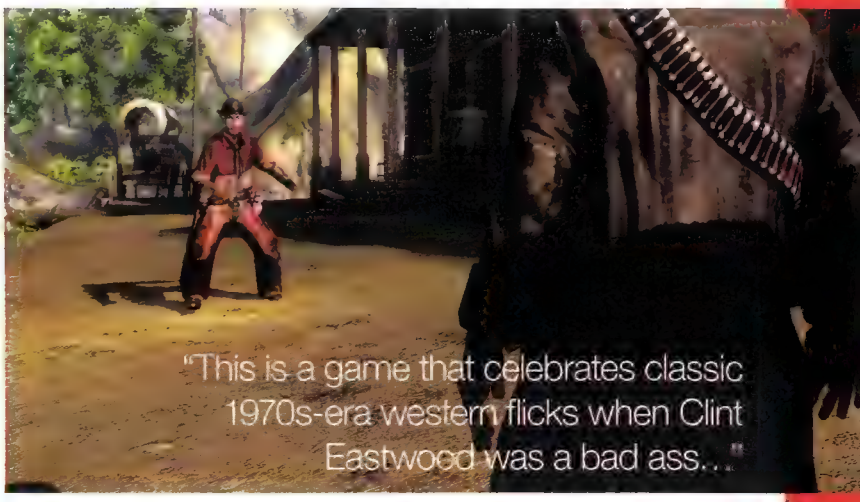
\+ Excellent animation and game dynamics—just pure fun from the get-go

– I'd be lying if I didn't say I wanted my HS in HD. . . but I'll wait.

System(s)	PS2
Developer	Clap Hanz
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	1-4
ESRB Rating	E 10+
Available	July 17

Call of Juarez

words Mike Griffin



Genuine Colt pistols and Remington rifles.

Having played both the console and PC version extensively, Call of Juarez is one of the few multi-platform first-person titles that I've genuinely enjoyed more on console than PC, and that goes against many personal tenets, including the worship of keyboard and mouse control in FPS games. Techland and Ubisoft have assembled a mighty good console port with nice extras. Irrespective of platform, CoJ is a well-crafted and gritty Wild West action shooter with a lot more soul and sophistication than you might think.

Call of Juarez is grim and violent enough that I wouldn't be letting the kiddies near it. The Reverend Ray McCall is completely off his rocker for most of the game and he's a rather disturbing character with an impressively demented and fanatically resolute voice-over courtesy of Marc Alaimo. Ray, more so than the other playable character Billy, is the perfect icon for Call of Juarez. This is a game that celebrates classic 1970s-era western flicks when Clint Eastwood was a bad ass in legendary tales, scripted in violent shades with harsh and merciless characters. Bleak personalities like Reverend Ray perform these incredible feats of skill and fearlessness, yet wallow in their own madness. We can't help but empathize and follow his path to atonement.

All of Ray's semi-biblical muttering isn't just for show; equip the testament and start preaching the Word near enemies and they'll briefly fall into a trance. Ray's gameplay also includes pretty typical Max Payne-ish bullet time slow-motion, but it's rather compelling in this western setting to guide twin reticules across the screen and blow away a couple of gunslingers. It's also good fun to dual-wield pistols in the Xbox 360 version, as the left and right triggers are used for each weapon. Ray can take a lot of hits thanks to his old gunslinger's chestplate, so he's a first-person character that makes you feel powerful (and vengeful) throughout his campaign of sharp-shooting and horseback pursuits. Billy's campaign introduces different combat—like bow and arrow attacks—and pseudo-platforming with his whip, however, overall, it doesn't hold up as well as Ray's adventure. On the other hand, I enjoyed young Billy's storyline and the time spent among Native Americans during his flight from justice.

When you're done with both campaigns, had your fill of unlockable levels and dueling, and satisfied your quest for achievements, you'll be happy to know that Call of Juarez on 360 includes a slightly better multiplayer game than its PC counterpart. Mix it up on Live with deathmatch, gold rush and hold-up multiplayer modes in all sorts of authentic Wild West scenarios like bank heists, the 1899 Wilcox train robbery and the final hours of the Dalton gang, using cool roles like miner (dynamite, anyone?), gunslinger and sniper. This version even includes multiplayer horseback combat.

Techland's Chrome engine runs beautifully on Xbox 360—easily comparable to running the game on a PC with high end options enabled, including anti-aliasing. In many ways, the 360 version of Juarez is plainly superior to the DirectX 9 version on PC (especially noteworthy is the console version's excellent draw distance and impressive lighting), and comes remarkably close to capturing the shader-licious advancements in the new Vista/Dx10 edition. At any rate, Call of Juarez is a solid, serious and pleasantly woven first-person action yarn with a lot of value on the disc.

Call of Juarez score **8.0**

\+ Authentic Wild West lore. Looks great on Xbox 360. Control feels excellent on console.

– Billy's infiltration bits still aren't too thrilling.

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Techland
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	Objective-based 8-16p
Available	June
ESRB Rating	M

Specs

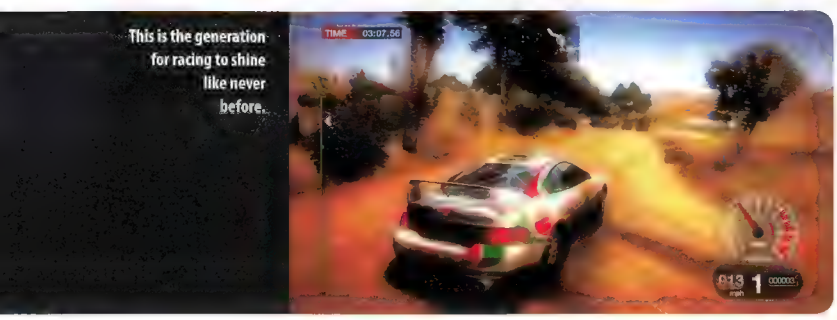
DiRT offers over 65 different surface types to race on using over two thousand combinations of track and vehicle, across 488,000 meters of road based on over 150,000 reference photos. You'll have access to 45 unique rally cars, super-powered 4x4s, off-road buggies and Paris Dakar-style race trucks from manufactures like Audi, BMW, Toyota, Lotus and Subaru (including X Games champ Travis Pastrana's indomitable Impreza). The game's career mode has 66 events, and there are championships in AWD, 2WD, Classic and RWD disciplines.

"...attention to detail and physics are in a word; stunning. This Neon engine is a force to be reckoned with."

this whole PS3, 360 racing thing is getting out of hand. Used to be I'd examine a game's replays to point out what looked real; now I'm examining them to point out what doesn't...and there isn't much. Where MotorStorm set the bar sky-high for arcade-style off-road racing (curse you Evolution Studios for making me expect real-time terrain deformation!), DiRT sets it for the comprehensive Rally experience.

The first thing that struck me was being greeted by Travis Pastrana, who does narration honors in his boy-next-door demeanor. He's a genuinely cool guy, so it's almost like having a pal in the game. I was just unaware that he'd risen to the top of the Rally crop so rapidly. Last footage I saw he was rolling his Impreza like it was on spin cycle. But hey: anyone who can do a triple back flip and graze the roof of Staple Center has earned his chops in my book.

One thing I can say for DiRT is that aside from being the most beautiful, it's among the most all-inclusive Rally games to date... Sure, car setup is nothing new but DiRT takes it a step further by actually providing real-time advice from Travis and friends should you want to make extra sure that you're set for the terrain ahead. I also really appreciate the diversity of events rather than the usual parade of checkpoint-based trials. As for the races themselves, whether you're challenging official CORR events, wide-open Rally Raid or the dirt and tarmac mix of Rally Crossracing circuits, the attention to detail and physics are, in a word, stunning. This Neon engine is a force to be reckoned with. Windows splinter and shatter with the utmost realism, the driver and co-pilot look and react perfectly down to fingers clutching the gear shift, body damage is in strict accord with impact, and the all-important feeling between player and terrain is eerily precise—a near perfect marriage of game and player. I say "near" because this level of racing is still in its infancy. The PS3/360 generation is going to be an insane ride. That said, I reviewed the game on 360 and experienced zero fps issues. Hopefully the same applies on PS3. The only visible flaw I found was the very occasional hiccup during replays where, say, a shrub or tree texture would flicker momentarily, but for all I know Codemasters nixed those before ship. And then there's the interface with its ethereal pulse and endless layers... brilliant. Just go drive already.



DiRT	score 9.0
+	Everything you could possibly want in a Rally game, period. Slick interface.
–	Load times are pretty long, and the music, though good, could be better.
System(s)	PC, PS3, 360
Developer	Codemasters
Publisher	Codemasters
Online/Multi	1-100
ESRB Rating	E
Available	June 19

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

words Dave Halverson

This hog has some warts

EA has made a game as deceptive as the namesake it's based on, creating an adventure that's as homogeneous as Pat from those old SNL sketches. What is it? Well, for a good stretch (4-6 hours depending on how much you tinker with the game's extracurricular activities) it's a 100% pure game of fetch—the idea being to assemble all 28 members of Dumbledore's Army in the Room of Requirement on Hogwarts' 7th floor. Some members simply agree and scurry up, while others require you carry out mundane tasks which all boil down to essentially the same thing: gofer duty. Although this heavily task-based stretch takes place amidst a gorgeously re-created Hogwarts (both inside and out), it's a strange direction for EA to take with the property. Kids (unless they are Potter maniacs) will surely grow weary of the tedium, while adventurists who welcome a spot of Monkey Island gameplay may find the crux of the errands overly shallow, unless, again, they happen to be die-hard disciples of all things Potter. Initially I thought it might be either training or a means to familiarize players with the massive grounds, however, spells are ultra-simplistic (a few taps or spins of the right analog does the trick) and once you set a task on the Marauders' Map, invisible footsteps guide your every step. You simply cannot get lost, or even sidetracked.

Once the 28 are assembled the game whisks you away into a trippy, dark, modern-day Potter nightmare based on the upcoming Order of the Phoenix, but it's a long time coming.

For fans who relish the thought of scurrying about Hogwarts, it's a stunning re-creation (on PS3 at least) set to enchanting Potter tuneage and laced with enough series-endemic fodder to make any Potter fan weep tears of joy. The school is simply brimming with pupils, portraits, and ghosts for Harry and company (Hermione and Weasley follow you everywhere) to interact with along with all manner of disarray for Harry to fix with his wand.

Although the facial modeling ranges from passable to horrible, the graphics on PS3 are good otherwise, although devoid of normal mapping (here's hoping the 360 version turns it on) and the kind of fine detail we've become accustomed to on thoroughbred HD. It's a shame the game is ported from the lesser systems (PS2 and Wii) as it could be so, so much better. The sooner third parties either stop producing Wii and PS2 ports the better. It also bears noting that camera cannot be freely rotated, which causes more than a few odd bottlenecks.

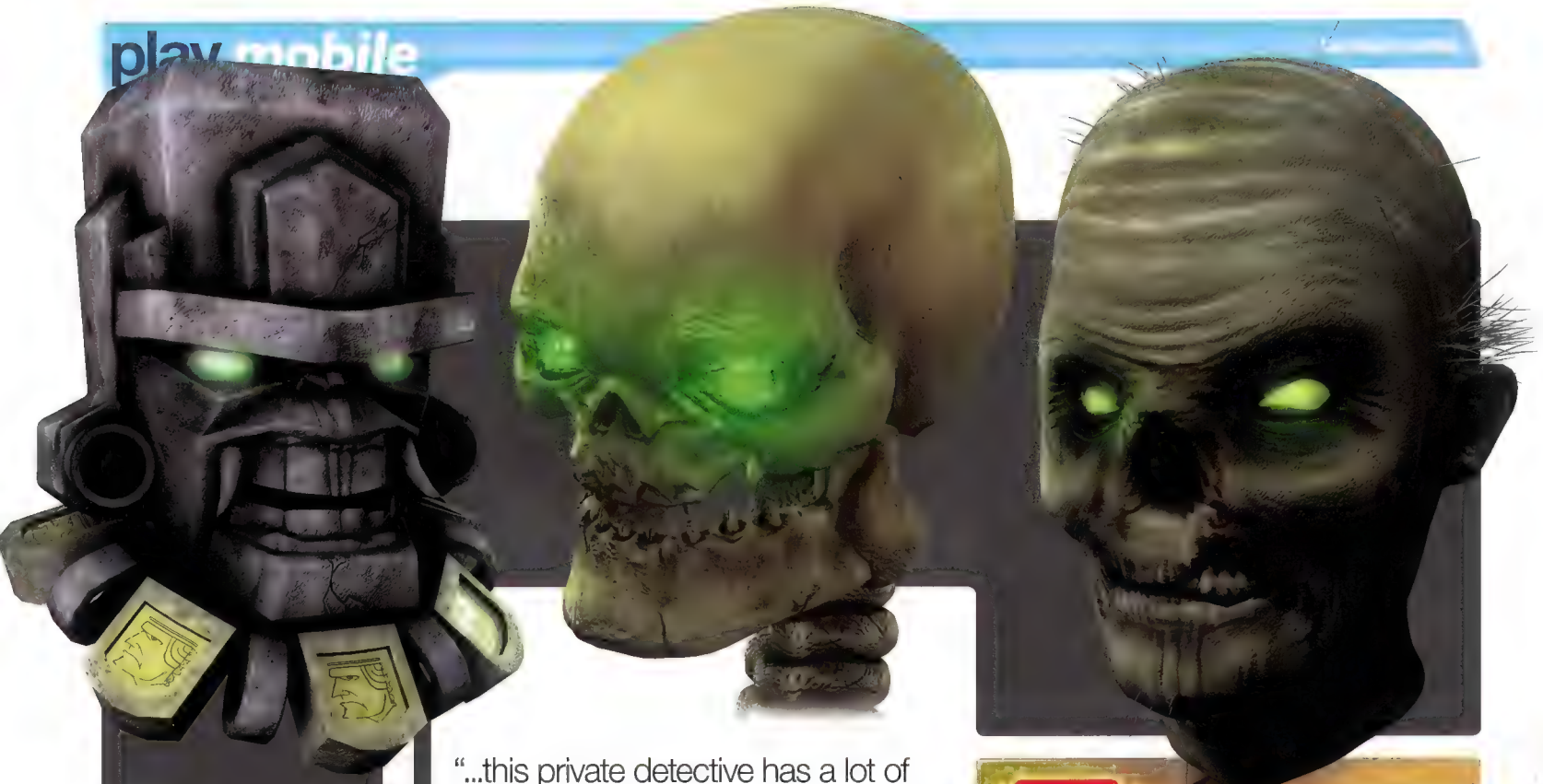
As a fan of EA's past outings I warmed up to this seemingly grown-up version somewhat over time, but only because it's my job to see these things through. I can't see shelling out $59.99 for such a poorly designed game unless again, you just love all things Harry Potter. Pity that young Harry has grown from a rather cool young lad to, well, a geek—he's just not a great protagonist. They could at least throw a cloak on him but as it stands you're basically controlling a geeky teenage boy in a preppy sweater—not exactly compelling when you're merely doing what the game tells you to.

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix — score 6.5

\+ Wonderfully re-created virtual Hogwarts packed with series-endemic fodder and music.

– Tedious and laborious much of the time. Not what you'd call "action packed" by any stretch of the imagination. Poor facial models, no normal mapping to speak of, limited camera.

System(s)	PS2, Wii, PC, 360, PS3 (reviewed)
Developer	EA Games
Publisher	EA
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	E 10+
Available	June 25



Dead Head Fred

Dynamite Head He

By Brady Hechter

Fred's got a big problem. He'd dead. And he's got no head. But problems are meant to be solved, which introduces nefarious science guy, who creates a new temporary head—well, if you can call a brain floating in a big tube of fluid strapped to a breathing apparatus a head—for Fred to wear as he takes off to figure out who murdered him. With no memory surrounding the events leading up to his death, this private detective has a lot of work to do before vengeance can be delivered. So off we go through the dusky city of Hope Falls on this action adventure to kill, decapitate and find out why Fred is dead.

"...this private detective has a lot of work to do before vengeance can be delivered."

The dominant mechanic in Dead Head Fred is the swipe of his spindly claw-like hands, which do damage to the point of stun, allowing you to rip off an enemy's noggin. You want to take these collected heads to the Grave Digger, who will reward you with a very special, warped head of your own. These can be collected and stored for later use, which accessed on the fly provide Fred with unique abilities and powers, like spitting out pools of acid or flaming skulls; certain enemies will be more venerable or aggressive depending on your attachment. The heads also allow you into new areas and help solve little puzzles. With one head, you can suck up water and spew out fires. With another, you suck up Freon from an exposed air conditioner and float from platform to platform to get to the next city street.

The visual style is a '40s sci-fi/noir mix. You might assume the game as a comic book inspiration, but it's a completely original creation, which makes it even more appealing. It looks great for the PSP, one of those games possessing the kind of style I'd love to see more of.

Fred has a real head for bloodshed

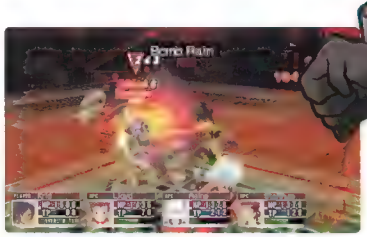
Dead Head Fred

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Vicious Cycle
Publisher	D3 Publishing
Online/Multi	NA
Available	August

Tales of the World
Radiant Mythology

The latest localization pick from Namco's dart-throwing monkey

words Casey Loe



Familiar faces in portable places.

Much to our surprise, Namco-Bandai has skipped over the recent PSP Tales of Destiny remakes to localize Tales of the World: Radiant Mythology instead. Tales of the World is a spin-off series that has traditionally mixed the unpopular random-dungeon genre with obscure Tales-series crossovers that would be largely lost on domestic audiences, so it's no surprise that the first four installments were passed over for a US release. But clearly something in Radiant Mythology caught the publisher's eye—the switch to preset dungeons, perhaps, or the impressive battle scenes—and Western audiences have finally been given the chance to play this quirky Tales companion piece.

The hero of Radiant Mythology is a character of your own creation—hence the subtitle, which the developers insist you pronounce MY-thology. (And I expect that all true Tales fans will ignore the mockery of GameStop clerks and comply with their edict!) Once you've created your very own adorable little Tales person and taken him or her through the first segment of the game, you'll gain the ability to draft up to three party members, most of whom are visiting heroes from classic Tales titles. Several of these characters have never appeared in any domestically released game, but the heroes of Symphonia, Phantasia, and Destiny are all well represented. (Abyss and Legendia got shafted though—only Tear, Luke, and Senel made the leap.) Still, it feels good to hear everyone's voices again, and to fight alongside classic heroes like Arche and Raine. Speaking of voices, big props to Namco-Bandai for properly re-recording every line of dialogue (and with most characters' original English voice actors) instead of cutting out the skits to save a buck... but big slops for failing to include a Japanese voice track and for again cutting the vocals out of the theme songs. (That's right—slops! I'm bringing it back.)

While the character creation system is cool, and the many Tales cameos are a delight, the game at the core of Radiant Mythology is much simpler than a typical Tales. There are a few towns to explore, subplots involving past Tales heroes to pursue, and a major storyline involving a world-consuming beast known as the Devourer, but the bulk of the game is spent on inane guild quests that send you into the same few dungeons over and over again. There are 300 quests in all, and while you're free to pick and choose among them, their lame "bring me three logs" and "kill 10 wolves" structures are pathetically uninspired. Fortunately, the quick-loading, fast-action battles breathe some life into even the dullest of fetch quests. And while I'm not a big fan of games that use a grab bag of quests as a structure, it does make sense for a handheld game, as the short, self-contained missions allows one to make meaningful progress during even brief commutes and phone calls with grandma.

Radiant Mythology will likely disappoint anyone expecting the intense storylines, vast worlds and well-designed dungeons of a "real" Tales title. But it succeeds the twin goals of a Tales of the World: Delighting Tales fans with a reprise of some of the series' greatest characters, and offering bite-size chunks of action-RPG that are enjoyable, if utterly forgettable.

"The quick-loading, fast-action battles breathe some life into even the dullest of fetch quests."

Tales of the World Radiant Mythology

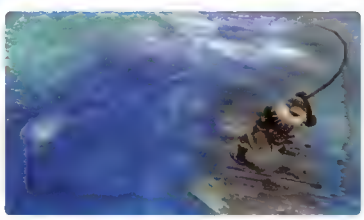
score

\+ Cool battles, nice to see old friends again

\- Most quests are lame, weak soundtrack

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Namco-Bandai
Publisher	Namco-Bandai
Online/Multi	Wireless item-trading
Available	July
ESRB Rating	Teen

Monster Hunter Freedom 2



"A truly unique setting, concept and characters, a meaty combat engine, arguably the best graphics on PSP, and virtually endless replay value...what's not to love?"

words Dai Kohama

It's always made me sad the Monster Hunter series never clicked with American gamers. A truly unique setting, concept and characters, a meaty combat engine, arguably the best graphics on PSP, and virtually endless replay value...what's not to love? The lack of a solid net infrastructure on PS2 killed the first game, as its two sequels were never even translated, but there's simply no excuse on PSP. Perhaps Monster Hunter Freedom 2, fresh off of moving 1.2 million units of software in Japan, will be the game that finally does it.

It's been said we Japanese go nuts over any game with "Monster" in its title, but there's far more to the Monster Hunter series than just its highly-marketable name. For those of you unfamiliar, a quick recap. This series takes it back to that most primeval of themes: it's hunt or be hunted. There's no real story, but Monster Hunter's unique visual design almost negates the need for one, drawing the player in through purely aesthetic means. Unlike 99% of other Japanese console RPGs, Monster Hunter has nothing to do with swords and sorcery–it's about the harsh, prehistoric realities of survival of the fittest.

Gameplay is entirely action-based, most closely compared to online action RPGs in the Phantasy Star Universe/PSO/Diablo mold, though with Capcom at the helm you can expect a far more solid, skill-based combat engine than any of those games. The action is more akin to something like Devil Kings than the sort of somnambulant combat one usually associates with games of its type, and it is this that makes Monster Hunter stand apart: It's not just a great multiplayer game, it's a great *game*, period.

While Monster Hunter's greatest joy still remains 4-player adventures (download a copy of Xlink Kai to make up for the lack of true online play, one of the very few things that can be legitimately complained about in Freedom 2), the one-player features are robust–I have over 250 hours on the clock, and there's still tons of things I have yet to do. Replay value is definitely one of the areas in which the Monster Hunter series belies its origins as an online game.

Some have labelled Freedom 2 a mission pack, and while there is some validity in this claim (you can import your character from Freedom 1), I find it unfair. The areas and quests are all-new, there are four new weapon categories (two melee and two ranged) and plenty of new enemies, along with all the new materials, recipes and items that entails. The most important new addition, however, is background loading, a heavily power-consuming (but optional) feature that reduces loading between areas to almost nil, indeed making it faster than the PS2 game on which it is based, Monster Hunter Dos.

If you didn't enjoy the original Freedom, there's little here that will convince you otherwise...but if you have yet to experience the series, you won't be missing out on anything by starting here. Bring a friend or three, and find out why Monster Hunter Freedom 2 is the most important Japanese PSP game yet.

Monster Hunter Freedom 2 — score

\+ Incredible visuals, nearly endless replay value

\- Still no online support

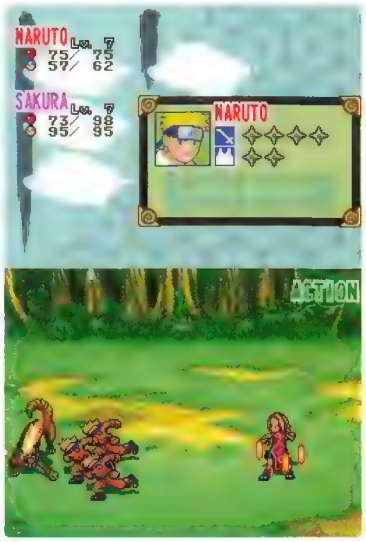
System(s)	PSP
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	September 1
ESRB Rating	Teen

Naruto: Path of the Ninja

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	TOSE	Available	Fall 2007
Publisher	TOMY Corporation	ESRB Rating	T

Path of the Ninja is an original Naruto DS RPG game for North America. Like a remix of previous GBA and DS Naruto RPGs, Path of the Ninja is in such an early stage of development that little can be said about the title. What we do know is that the game will feature six different playable characters: Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, Shikamaru, Neji and Rock Lee, and that combat is really traditional RPG stuff. Although the stylus can be used to select attacks and ninjitsu/genjitsu, most of the game is going to look familiar if you've played anything with hit points before.

Telling the origin story of Naruto (seriously, how many games are going to cover this ground?), players develop their team of three ninjas, and send them out on missions for the village of Konoha. Combat is turn-based, with front and back rows dealing different weapon-dependant damage. The over-world is bright and nostalgic, but the music is disappointingly unfamiliar. Still, if you haven't had your fix of Naruto yet, this is one more way to waste an afternoon! **Heather Campbell**



"Combat is turn-based, with front and back rows dealing different weapon-dependant damage."

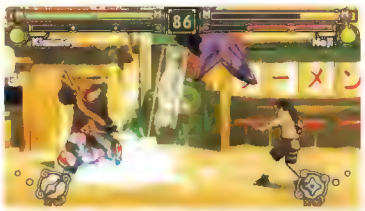
Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Heroes

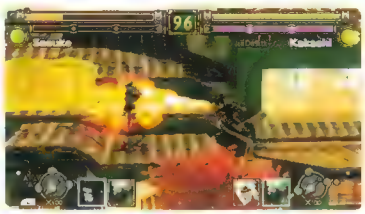
System(s)	PSP	Multi	NA
Developer	CyberConnect2	Available	August 2007
Publisher	Namco Bandai	ESRB Rating	RP

There are so many Naruto titles on the market, it's easy to feel a little disoriented when you pick up a new one. With the characters consistent across multiple platforms and genres, often I find myself thinking, "Have I played this before?" I'm nearly Narutoversaturated.

When playing Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Heroes, I couldn't get over my feelings of déjà vu. Suddenly I realized I had played the game before, on the PlayStation 2. Well, sort of. Taking the arenas from the Ultimate Ninja titles and adding a new three-on-three team battle element, Ultimate Ninja Heroes is a bit of a port, and a bit of an original title for the US market. Why so many "original" titles for Naruto? Because the show in Japan has gone into entirely different territory. Localizers are being forced to re-develop Naruto games, using original North American assets. Players can "localize" the characters even further, by changing their stats, and then fighting via Wi-Fi.

"Suddenly I realized I had played the game before, on the PlayStation 2."





Finally, Naruto fans who only have a PSP – not that I can imagine anyone who only has a PSP—will get their chance to battle, with more than 20 characters, original combo attacks, and locales from throughout the Chunin exam. **Heather Campbell**

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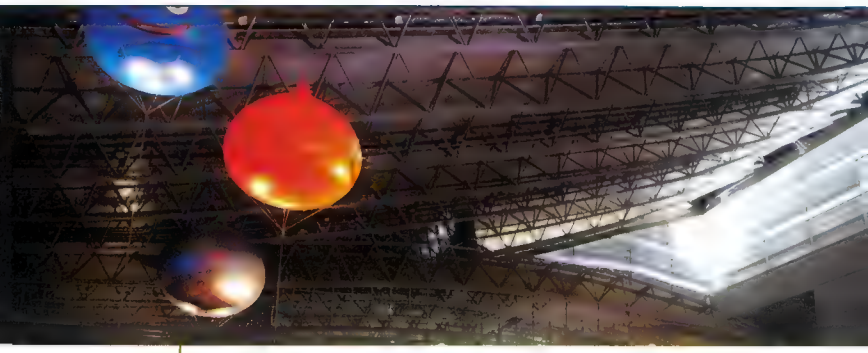
Nick Des Barres

Dai Kohama

Square Enix Party 2007



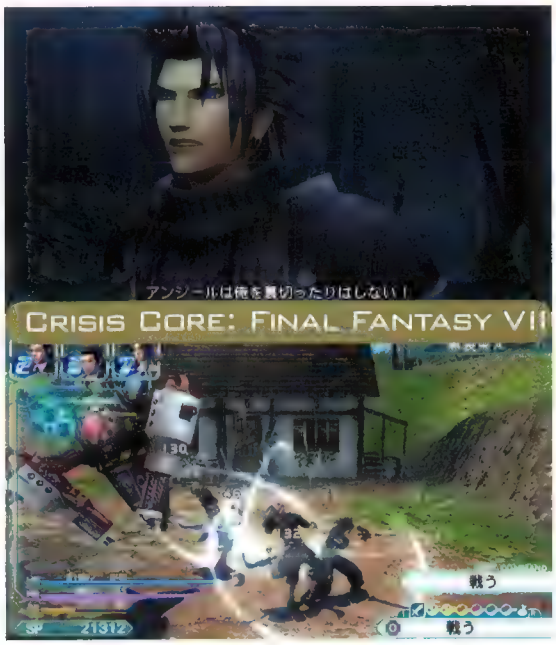
words Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama

In this strange, post-E3 world, every company seems to be hosting their own game events. It's probably safe to say none will approach the pomp and grandeur of the Square Enix Party 2007, a gala event free to attend for anyone in the Tokyo area. And attend they did: Nearly 80,000 of them, in fact. To put that into perspective, we're talking about roughly half the attendence for last year's Tokyo Game Show, and this is for *one company.* Little surprise, perhaps, when one considers the almost religious fervor the company inspires in its fans, myself included. Yes, I am proud to self-identify as a Square Enix fanboy, and this event was more or less a personal dream come true. Tons and tons of playable titles dressed up in lavish booths, numerous new game announcements, the chance to buy oodles of licensed merchandise...could it get any better? Our space may be limited, but on the following pages I hope to share my enthusiasm for the many major new titles Square Enix had on display at this truly epic gathering. (Please note that virtually none of the games we'll cover here have American release dates yet.)

Just one example of the incredible free swag available at the show...provided you waited in line for hours to play games. This one was a soundtrack sampler for games that won't be out for months yet.

This swanky, museum style booth had a display of every Final Fantasy game ever made, including all spinoffs and ports, on a timeline from 1987 to the present.

Perhaps the most significant announcement at the show was The Last Remnant, an all-new IP (!). A traditional RPG running on the Unreal Engine 3 and due for simultaneous worldwide Xbox 360/PS3 release in early 2008, The Last Remnant promises an epic story and massive, fully-controllable army battles. Rest assured we'll have much more on this one in the near future.

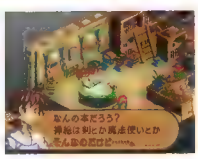


Long thought to be vaporware, CCFFVII made a fully playable appearance at the show in what appeared to be a near-final version. Telling the tale of Zack in the years leading up to Final Fantasy VII, this action RPG would appear to be the highest-profile PSP game yet. The American localization has not yet been announced, but an eventual Stateside release is a foregone conclusion.

This (massively) enhanced PSP port of the original PSone Final Fantasy Tactics has already moved some 250,000 units in Japan, and for good reason–it adds breathtaking CG cinemas, new characters, expanded cutscenes and versus play to an already near-perfect game. Expect this one to hit the US sometime this year.

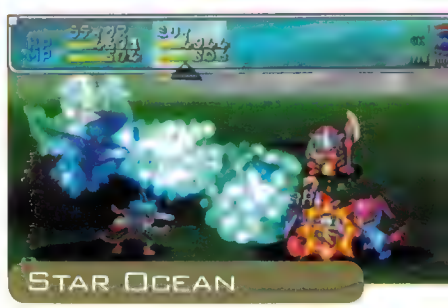
Final Fantasy IV is perhaps the closest game in the series to my heart, and the fact that it's receiving a DS remake almost gets me a little misty. To be programmed by Matrix, the team behind the DS remake of FFIII, and overseen by original story writer Takashi Tokita, I foresee no scenario where this game could possibly fail. It will probably be released in late 2007 in Japan, early 2008 in America.

The fourth and possibly final expansion for the venerable Final Fantasy XI: Online (it celebrates its fifth anniversary this year), Wings of the Goddess sends players hurtling through time to the ages of Vana'diel past, when all those ruins you're so familiar with were thriving cities. No word yet on new jobs, but Wings is slated for a late 2007 release.



The sequel to the well-received Final Fantasy Tactics Advance (hence, "A2"), this DS game blends luscious hand-drawn sprites and backgrounds with surprisingly hardcore strategic gameplay that would seem to belie its somewhat juvenile theme. The library-themed booth for the game was a nice touch.

In this direct sequel to Final Fantasy XII on DS, Vaan takes center stage in a realtime strategy game set high above Ivalice on the floating continent of Lemurés. While much more lighthearted in tone than the original Matsuno-centric FFXII, the gameplay and presentation are rock-solid. It's already sold 400,000 copies in Japan, making it Square Enix's third-best-selling DS game after FFIII and DQM Joker.



Though only First Departure has had screen shots released, tri-Ace's well-regarded sci-fi RPG series is due for a major reboot. First of all, I and II are getting grounds-up remakes on PSP: That's First Departure and Second Evolution, respectively. Most exciting, however, was the announcement of a Star Ocean IV, with target platform and release date still completely unknown.

ファイナルファンタジーXII
FINAL FANTASY XII
INTERNATIONAL
ZODIAC JOB SYSTEM

The development of FFXII was famously troubled, and late in its production cycle it had an elaborate job system with vastly complex License Boards drastically simplified. This version of the game, unlikely to come out in America, reinstates the job system along with English voice, 16:9 support and a handful of other enhancements.

The biggie, folks. The game-changer, if you will. Not playable at the show in any form whatsoever but shown on video, I can say but two things at this point: It sports the best 3-D on the DS, bar none, and command-driven, turn-based battles are back. Will it be the best most awesomest thing ever? Will it fail miserably? Tune in in approximately six months for the Play Japan review.

The Square Enix DS madness just does not stop with Ring of Fates, the direct sequel to the original GameCube Crystal Chronicles. Offering fully-voiced cutscenes, four-player local network action and some of the best 3-D to ever grace the system, we have high hopes for the title. Crystal Bearers on Wii, however, was a no-show save for a blink-and-you-missed-it 30-second trailer.

Jupiter, the team behind Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories, has been long at work on It's A Wonderful World for DS, a unique action RPG that has you take control of two characters simultaneously–one on each screen. Its extreme Japan-centrism (the game takes place in Shibuya, Tokyo) may present an impediment to American release, which would be a shame.

Finally getting a chance to play Dragon Quest Swords relieved me of many misgivings I had about the title. Don't worry, folks: It's still DQ, and it's a lot of fun. The game may be fairly simple and best enjoyed in short bursts, but the production values are high and the visceral thrill of hacking Akira Toriyama monsters to bits is quite nice indeed. Let's just hope it makes it to America this year.

Behold...legendary hero Roto's Celestial Sword from Dragon Quest. Most definitely not for sale.

Square Enix's traditional Closed Mega Theater: Where the most exciting stuff goes down. Numerous revelations were to be had here, not least of which were new FFXIII trailers. But hey, we already know about those games, right? What we *didn't* know about was Dissidia Final Fantasy, a PSP FF All Stars fighting game being touted as the FF 20th Anniversary commemorative title. Only brief flashes were shown, so we can't say much about the gameplay...but damn, did it look beautiful. Also teased was an upcoming Kingdom Hearts series announcement to be revealed at this year's Tokyo Game Show, and the third game in the Parasite Eve series. Yes, you heard me correctly...but don't get too excited: The game, entitled The 3rd Birthday, is for Japanese cell phones only. Oh Square Enix, why must you play with my heart so?

Finally due for American release nearly a year after its Japanese debut, Yuji Horii's latest monster-collecting Dragon Quest spinoff has sold more than a million copies in Japan. It's with good reason, too: Sporting some of the best visuals on DS and a battle engine some argue is deeper than Pokémon, the series may finally be ready to make a splash in the West.

Cosplay

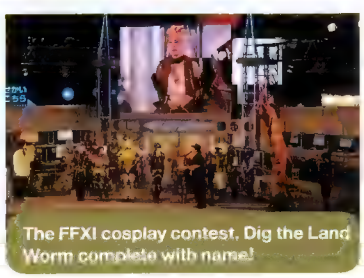
A Kingdom Hearts II posse

The Mithra Arc Angel isn't quite so cute in the actual game

All the fan girls were fawning over this particularly authentic Cloud

Stunning craftsmanship on this Aht Urhgan equipment

Final Fantasy VII characters



The FFXI cosplay contest. Dig the Land Worm complete with name!

International Media Roundtable

SQUARE ENIX PARTY 2007

YUJI HORII

Creator, Dragon Quest Series; Director, Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker

Q: Mr. Horii, is it true there's a law in Japan that states Dragon Quest games can only come out on a weekend? And have you ever skipped work to buy a game?
Yuji Horii: First of all, it's not a law (laughs). Back in the days of DQIII, games always came out on Fridays because of distribution reasons. We didn't want kids skipping school, so we held the games back ourselves until the weekend. To answer your second question...I think this was last year...there's a giant electronics store near the Square Enix building in Shinjuku, and I lined up and bought a game there during work hours. Apparently it became a bit of gossip back at the office (laughs). By the way, it was Final Fantasy III for DS.

Unlike the Final Fantasy series, Dragon Quest has always been associated with a strong central figure–yourself, Mr. Horii.

> "What I wanted to do most with DQIX is allow people to be able to adventure together. That's why I chose DS."
> –Yuji Horii

Is it difficult having to manage several projects at once, whereas before you could concentrate on one game every few years?
Sometimes I do think we're putting out too many Dragon Quests, but the fact is they're all very different, and there are so many things I want to do with them. Previously I could only make games one at a time, and it's true I now have to focus on many things at once. However, because the concepts are all so different I wouldn't say it's difficult.

Did creating Joker on DS help prepare you for DQIX, and did its development influence the decision to put DQIX on DS?
Yes, making Joker was excellent practice for IX. We actually decided to put DQIX on DS before Joker was even made, but having the experience of creating it definitely gave me the confidence that a numbered DQ on DS was going to work.

How about Dragon Quest Swords? How are you making use of the Wiimote?
To put it simply, we're using it to give the player the exhilarating feeling of attacking monsters directly. The Wii obviously has the Nunchuck as well, but we're using the Wiimote for everything from attacking to movement to shopping...it's a very simple game to control.

First person games aren't very popular in Japan, but they're huge in the West. Were you thinking specifically of a Western target when you designed Swords?
No, not really. It was a simple question of the best way to bring the feeling of cutting and slashing to the user...I wasn't really thinking of any market. Also, the battles in Dragon Quest have actually always been first person.

I was playing the demo earlier and noticed a point where you could choose to go left or right at a fork in the road. Will there be a lot of branching paths in Swords?
There are actually so many even I have trouble keeping track of them (laughs). One wrong turn, and I get totally lost!

Getting back to Joker, the Japanese and American releases will be almost a year apart. Have you made any adjustments to the American version during that time?
We had to work really, really hard and rush to make the December release date for the Japanese version, so there were several aspects I wasn't totally happy with. I've fixed a lot of things...I really wanted the American version to be perfect. For instance, there are now more spots to level up after completing the game and the control has been adjusted. Worldwide wi-fi rankings will be added, too.

In Joker, players can't battle each other realtime over wi-fi, but must instead download each other's monster roster to fight against. Why this type of system?
Well, just thinking about the number of users...let's say there were 100,000 people online. It simply wouldn't be possible. I think the ranking and download system was the best possible compromise given the limitations.

What kinds of challenges are you facing with bringing a numbered Dragon Quest to a handheld system?
What I wanted to do most with DQIX is allow people to be able to adventure together. That's why I chose DS. But, of course, going to a handheld introduced serious memory and presentation restrictions that were very difficult to deal with.

DQVIII was fully-voiced in its North American version, whereas it was silent in Japan. Are there any plans to come back to voice acting for IX?
I think that would be very difficult given the space restrictions.

When DQIX was first shown, it appeared to be have a simple action game structure. Recently shots have been released that reveal it to be turn-based, like every other Dragon Quest before it. Why the change, so late into development?
I never had any intention of making an action game. What I wanted to do at that initial conference was get across the idea of of everyone playing together, so I had Level-5 put together a prototype. I didn't intend for the combat to be the focus, but the media totally misunderstood what was going on went on and on about "it's action! DQIX is action!". In any case, development continued and what you see now is closer to the final battle system.

So you're saying the media simply misunderstood.
That's right. I never said DQIX was an action game.

Thank you very much for your time today, Mr. Horii.

International Media Roundtable

SQUARE ENIX PARTY 2007

AKITOSHI KAWAZU

Executive Producer, Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles Series

MITSURU KAMIYAMA

Director, Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Ring of Fates

TOSHIYUKI ITAHANA

Director and Character Designer, Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers

Q: First I'd like to ask about the twin motif in Ring of Fates. Where did the idea come from, and how is it tied to the story?
Mitsuru Kamiyama: Well, it's a continuation of the homey feel the original Crystal Chronicles had. One of the themes of that game was familial love. We elaborated on that with the love between siblings for this game, and the drama is born from that.

Drama with twins? Will they impersonate each other, and deceive people?
MK: No, we'd prefer to write stories about the trust between familes and siblings. When writing about meetings between strangers, you have to establish a new relationship, but with characters who are family you don't need that kind of exposition. The characters already have strong bonds and mutual trust, and that's the kind of story I want to write.

Ring of Fates is a 4-player game like the GameCube original, but doesn't offer online wi-fi play. Was this a technical consideration, or a conscious gameplay decision?
MK: Games that you can play with your friends together and games you play against people you can't see are conceptually two very different things, and this game is the former. If you've played Ring of Fates you probably already noticed, but this game has far more action elements than the original FFCC, and character interaction is very important. If the game was playable over a net connection there would be lag, and we would have had to make it less action-oriented.

FINAL FANTASY CRYSTAL CHRONICLES THE CRYSTAL BEARERS

Stylistically Square seems to be splitting into teams that specialize in dark photorealism, and teams that specialize in light, happy imagery like the material found in these games. How are you keeping the balance?
MK: I can tell you we don't put too much thought into keeping a balance. We produce the kind of imagery that matches the gameplay and the type of stories we want to tell. On these games, for instance, photorealism wouldn't work. Ring of Fates is a DS game that's all about playing together with friends...it has the kinds of stylized characters and exaggerated movements that lend themselves to that. On Crystal Bearers, the idea is to use bright colors to emphasize the feeling of being a hero.

I'm interested in how the character design process works at Square. How does one create a good character?
Toshiyuki Itahana: I think the first thing you have to do is create a character you, yourself, like. Once you feel like you understand the game's story, you have to design a character you feel good about, one you could look at for a long time. Once you feel you have the right design, you take it to the scenario writer and usually get told "that's totally wrong!" and the discussions begin (laughs). Through much trial and error you arrive at the final look...designing and re-designing until everyone feels confident about the character.

When most of the game is played from a top-down perspective like Ring of Fates, often all you can see is the top of a character's head. What kind of considerations do you have to give such specialized character design?
TI: That's a good question. If it were realistic character design you could differentiate characters with, say, varying hairstyles, but with such stylized, superdeformed characters as these the most important thing is color. Following that is using silhouettes to create character. For instance, in Ring of Fates we have a very tall, thin character with big hands, and a short, round character with leaves growing out of her head...painting with such broad strokes makes them easy to recognize and identify with, I think.

What can you tell us about the Wii game, Crystal Bearers? The 30-second trailer looked very different from the other two Crystal Chronicles games.
MK: The concept for the other two FFCC games is the ability to experience the Final Fantasy world with friends through a game system specialized for action. Crystal Bearers, on the other hand, is tuned for solo play–we want you to feel like a superhero when you play it.

The trailer would seem to indicate a Kingdom Hearts-style action RPG, but how are you putting the Wiimote to use?
Akitoshi Kawazu: The trailer is actually all real-time gameplay. You remember the giant gun the main character was carrying? It's fired with the Z Trigger on the Wiimote. You also pilot the huge airships you can see in the footage by tilting the controller. Sometimes the control is also more conventional, of course.

Perhaps the least popular feature of the original Crystal Chronicles was the miasma. Is it coming back?
MK: [In English] No (laughs)! Like you say, it was very unpopular. On the GameCube game, we had to keep all four players on the same screen...that was the only reason the miasma existed. On DS, each player has their own screen, so you can run around free.

I get the impression from the Ring of Fates demo that this game has much more of a story than the original, which was more a party game.
MK: That's true. When you're playing together with friends, I don't think people are too concerned with drama, but I think the story of the original FFCC just wasn't enough for one player. Our other staff felt the same way, too, so both single and multiplayer in Ring of Fates has a fleshed-out story. This really made it twice as hard on the development team...it's like getting two games in one (laughs).

> "If the game was playable over a net connection there would be lag, and we would have had to make it less action-oriented."

Do you consider the world of Final Fantasy to be a heavily moralistic one? Does good always triumph over evil? Are you always conscious of this when you make a new game in the series?
AK: Well, yes, there's always a main character on a journey, who has to defeat some final enemy who's a very bad guy (laughs). Things do tend to go that way, but I don't think we feel any particular duty to make it so. For me, an FF with a dark hero who had done questionable things in his past would definitely still be FF to me.

Finally, please tell us a little about what it's like to work on the Wii versus GameCube. What are you able to achieve on the new hardware that would have been impossible before?
MK: Well, I think you could already do great visuals on GameCube with a little effort, but the biggest boon on Wii is simply more RAM. I think it's really expanded the scope of games we can make. I don't just mean making prettier graphics, either–I mean expanding the score of the gameplay itself.

Thank you all for your time today.

SQUARE ENIX PARTY 2007

MIYAKO KIBE, HIDEMI MATSUZUKA AND KANJI R. TASHIRO

Square Enix Merchandising Team

Q: In 2007, Square Enix will finally be giving Americans the chance to own all the incredible collectibles Japanese fans have had access to for years. Where will they be available?
A: There are actually a number of American comic book stores that carry our figures already. However, we've heard a lot of fan feedback from people who just don't have specialty shops like that in their area, so we decided we had to open an official Square Enix online shop for America. We'll still keep selling stuff in comic book stores, but we want people to feel they'll be able to get everything at our new website.

When will the site open?
We don't have an exact date yet, but we're aiming for mid-June. We'll be able to announce the open date soon.

What about a physical, devoted Square Enix merchandising store like the one in Tokyo?
I wonder about that (laughs). We don't have any plans for one yet. That's still a pretty high hurdle to jump. Our priority right now is getting the online store up and running.

Will the items available on the online store be the same high-quality products Square Enix sells in Japan? How about original merchandise exclusively for America?
As far as original merchandise, we'll definitely have stuff that'll only be available on the online store, like figure repaints and so on. The other items will indeed be the same exact products we sell in Japan. For instance, the recent Final Fantasy III mini figure line with all the jobs, that was something that was only available in Japan, but American fans will finally get the chance to buy things like that exclusively via the online store. For stuff like the Play Arts series of action figures we currently have in American stores, there'll be online-only costume and weapon variations.

So will the online exclusive products you're planning *only* be available from the American store? Will it be Japanese fans that are now left out in the cold?
No, not at all. There won't be any purely American exclusives, just worldwide online shop exclusives.

What about items other than figures? In Japan the extensive line of silver accessories Square Enix sells are very popular.
We're definitely thinking about offering those for sale, too. Unfortunately with regards to the Kingdom Hearts accessories, licensing issues with Disney will prevent us from selling them in America. The Final Fantasy items, however, will be no problem.

There's no denying the Square Enix merchandising products are of a quality commensurate with the games themselves. Of course, using real sterling silver for the accessories and so on results in very high prices. Are you considering a tiered pricing structure, or will most of the items be fairly expensive?
That's true. For our Dragon Quest items, which are aimed at somewhat younger fans, some of them can be bought for as little as $3 or so. However, our Final Fantasy products skew a little older–high school students, college students. We want to keep the quality high, so the prices will have to match.

I'm curious, what's the best-selling silver accessory you've released so far?
You might be surprised, but it's the Final Fantasy VIII pieces. We continue to sell our silver items for a long time, so naturally the older ones will have higher sales, but even nearly ten years after the game's release the FFVIII stuff does really well.

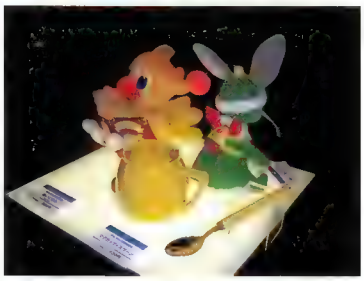
All the silver stuff is designed by Tetsuya Nomura, correct? I've always been curious if the line of silver accessories was his idea. He doesn't hide the fact he's a big fan of them.
Yes, the initial idea behind this line of products came from Mr. Nomura and myself (laughs). They're not all Nomura designs, however. For instance, on the FFXII items, we're using materials other than silver, like turquoise. Different designers, of course, result in completely different products.

To get back to the figures for a moment...I'm really curious about the prototype Play Arts figure of Lightning from Final Fantasy XIII that's been seen behind glass at three shows now. Other than painting it looks complete–is it going to be released in advance of the game?
On that item we're planning to release it simultaneously with the game...but to be honest, we have no idea when the game will be released yet (laughs).

I'm a little disappointed. I was hoping it would be released as a sort of teaser product before the game.
Oh, don't worry, it'll definitely be released. Just not for a while yet (laughs).

What has been your best-selling Play Arts figure so far?
Definitely the Final Fantasy XII figures that were just recently released. We're planning a slew of new Final Fantasy VII figures for the 20th anniversary, however those will probably eclipse the FFXII stuff in sales.

> "...we'll definitely have stuff that'll only be available on the online store. The other items will indeed be the same exact products we sell in Japan. ..."



What about music CDs? Next to figures, they're probably the single most-wanted item among hardcore Square Enix fans.
Unfortunately merchandising and the music CD people are two different departments, so I can't comment directly. I can tell you, however, that options are definitely being looked at. When it comes to music there are a lot of rights issues that have to be worked out, so that might still take some time.

Our time's running out, so please tell us about your future vision for expanding Square Enix merchandising into the West.
Your previous question about a Square Enix-only store in America was very interesting. While we might not be quite there yet, we do plan on setting up sales booths for our products at events like Comic-Con, this July in San Diego. We just hope our American fans support our products with the same enthusiasm we see in Japan.

We're looking forward to them! Thank you for your time today.

Moero!
Nekketsu Rhythm Damashii
Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan 2

Once again, you will believe that male cheerleaders could actually kick some ass.

words Eric L. Patterson

I was introduced to the original Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan during a summer trip to Japan. I got my first glimpse of the game one day while watching television, and as the commercial displayed various scenes of a crazy-looking J-pop infused rhythm game bound for the Nintendo DS, I knew that I had to have it. Braving the mean streets of DenDen Town in greater Osaka, I made my way from game shop to game shop until I secured myself a copy.

Being that I love any game where the objective is hitting differently colored markers in time to an over-produced Japanese beat, I ate up everything Ouendan had to offer and proclaimed it to be the best game released for the little handheld Japan loves so much. Thankfully, I wasn't alone: Ouendan became the must-have import of the year and received accolades far and wide. So, then, it only makes sense that more of a good thing could be nothing other than, well, a good thing.

Make no mistake: Ouendan 2 is indeed "more." The overall experience is for the most part the same, and only those of us who loved and adored the original are bound to notice the subtle yet important changes that were put in place. Japanese players (and J-pop loyalists) will now be able to appreciate the features that were put into place when Ouendan became Elite Beat Agents, from the ability to skip the extended intros and outros on songs to the very welcome feature which allows you to review the last moments of your most recent failure to see exactly what you did wrong. Even better, the replay save option has been improved over what we got in EBA, now providing save slots for replays instead of being limited to retaining one replay per song.

So, then, I should be in love with the game, right?

Problem is, it's more a strong like than a deep, passionate love. Ouendan succeeded as much as it did thanks to its fabulous soundtrack, tied together with a wacky cast of characters put into ridiculous but unquestionably funny situations. In both of those regards, Ouendan 2 sits in the shadow of its older brother. Nick assured me my disappointment with the song selection this time around was a question not of quality but one of personal taste, yet I simply refuse to accept that. Even though the list of songs you'll be tapping away to are a most respectable rundown of J-pop hits, the energy that flowed through the first game's soundtrack simply isn't there. The storylines and cast also just don't seem as inspired in this third iteration. I think the problem is, after two previous games done in the same style, that unique charm just isn't as unique anymore.

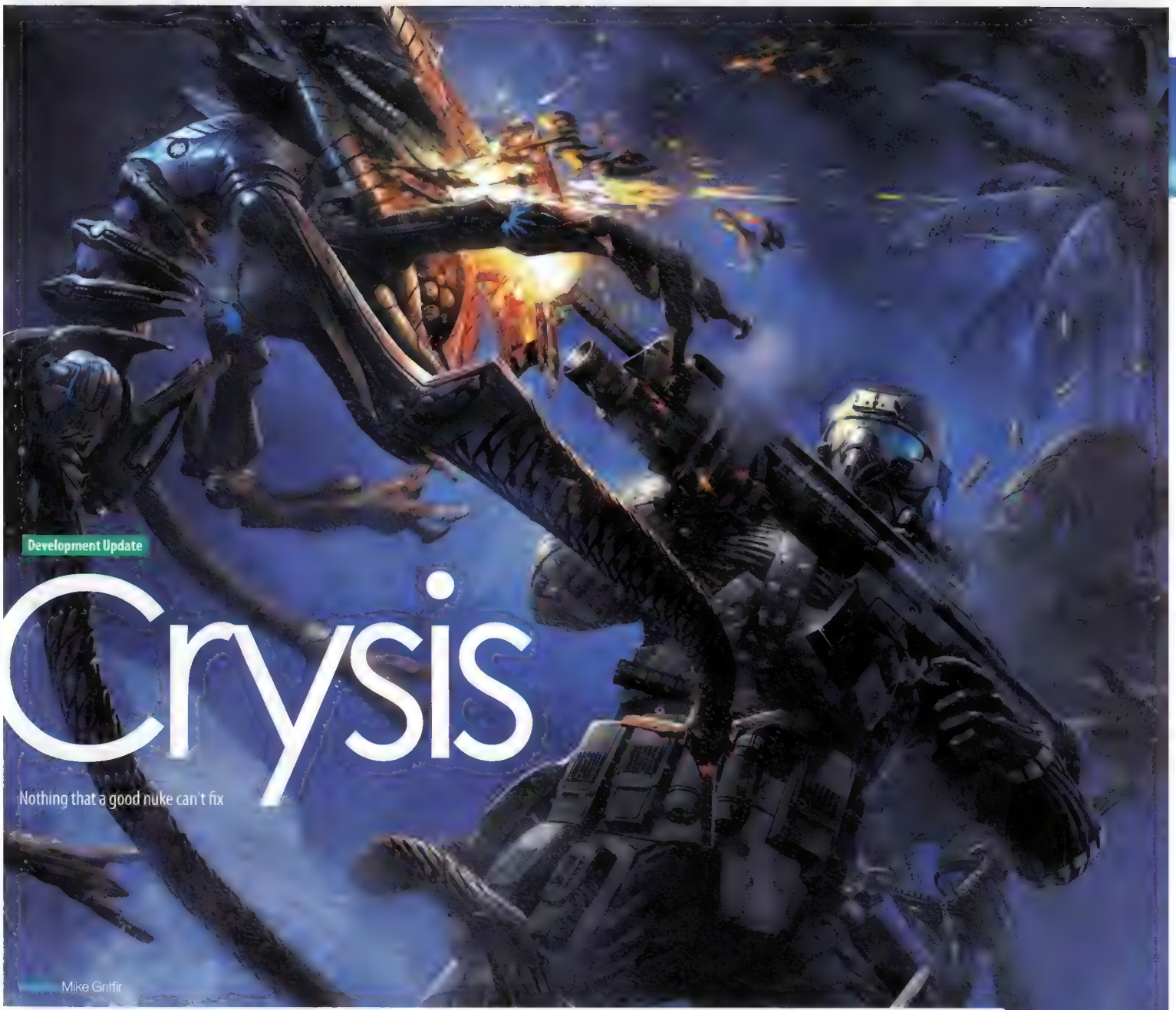
Thus is the curse of Ouendan 2: a better game technically in pretty much all regards when compared to the original, but lacking in that certain something that made so many of us fall in love with Japan's most famous band of male cheerleaders. Make no mistake, this is a most enjoyable game that is absolutely worth your time. A game that equals the brilliance that was the first Ouendan, however, it is not.

> "Make no mistake, this is a most enjoyable game that is absolutely worth your time. "

Moero! Nekketsu Rhythm Damashii Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan 2 — score 8.5

- Loopy aesthetic, quality single-player experience
- Load times between mini-games is excessive

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	iNiS
Publisher	Nintendo
Available	Now (Japan)



Development Update

Crysis

Nothing that a good nuke can't fix

Mike Griffin

I really enjoy the first Predator film; it's a righteous blend of smothering jungle action, raw firepower and believable sci-fi. Crysis has the same kind of credo in its DNA, so when I was presented with a round table of Crytek's lead developers to query any Crysis-related question, naturally the first thing that came to mind was: can I totally mow down part of the jungle with a chain gun, like in Predator? Sten Hubler, Crysis' lead level designer, knows all about this special place. "Yes you can," he confirms. "And there is something strangely meditative about using a chaingun in the jungle." With a nod to the outstanding graphical effects of Crysis, we ship out to the Philippines Sea for triple-A production values and close encounters in zero-G.

As with Crytek's previous first-person shooter, 2004's Far Cry, Crysis is bursting with an unbridled Michael Bay-like action fetish where everything blows up magnificently and excessively. The overall detail in the Crysis island environment is remarkable; it's something the developers have called "videorealistic" as opposed to photorealistic, because so much of the game's presentation is reactive, dynamic, blended and procedural. While the technology of Crysis hogs the limelight, there's a similar kind of organic flow in its campaign. Yes, the ultra-scripted roller coaster rides of the Half-Life and Call of Duty series certainly have a place in the annals of great FPS design, however Crysis proudly encourages wildly different approaches and player-made pacing with meaningful results. If you live through a failed objective, often you can still move on. You can lose a squad member permanently and continue the fight. Just don't expect the game to forget any of these incidents, because every major happenstance re-wires the outcome of events.

Without further ado, let's throw the mic over to the men who are creating what may become the year's best release. If you've been trying to avoid major details about Crysis so it's still a big, lovely, fresh surprise when you finally crack open the box…beware, spoilers ahead.

Crysis	
System(s)	PC
Developer	Crytek
Publisher	EA
Online/Multi	32p Deathmatch, Power Struggle
Available	September

interview

Greg Sarjeant – Senior Designer / Story Supervisor, Crytek
Sten Hubler – Lead Level Designer, Crytek

In Far Cry, the player was a one-man army facing off against a wannabe Dr. Moreau and his pack of mutants. In Crysis, the threat comes from a powerful atomic nation and deep outer space. You're bringing back up.

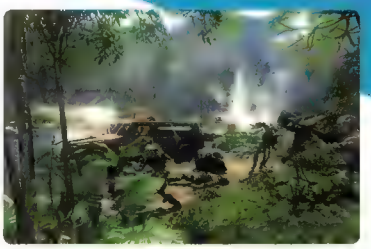
play: In the early part of Crysis' story, the relationship between the US and North Korea becomes openly hostile. Besides the dispute over this alien ship, why are the two nations so pissed off at each other?
Greg: In 2020, North Korea has emerged as a world power. Tensions with the US have boiled over. The story of Crysis revolves around the search for a team of American archaeologists working under the auspices of the North Korean government. The team unearthed an unusual fossilized object on a small island in the Philippines Sea and as they learn more about the strange fossil, the North Koreans seal off the island from the outside world. Contact with the American archaeologists is severed and a Special Forces squad is dispatched as part of a covert operation to find them. Soon the conflict escalates to all out war as the rival nations fight for control of the island and the secrets it holds.

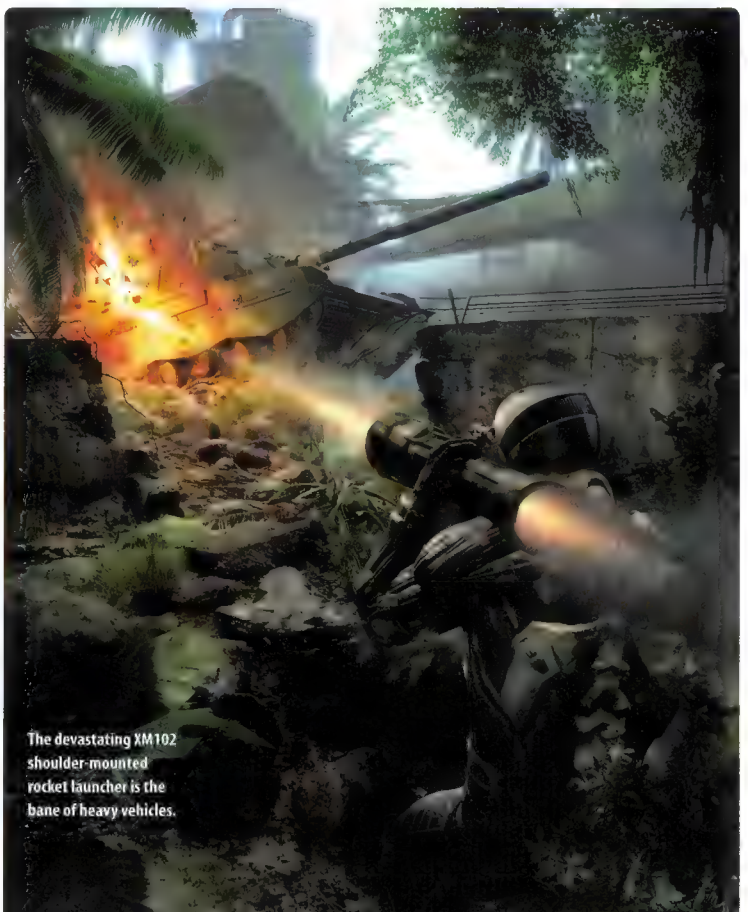
So this huge alien ship crashed into the island; is that a bad cosmic bounce, or is this the usual invasion tactic for the aliens?
Greg: Little is known about the creatures, their motives or their origins. While their behavior towards mankind is overtly hostile, this may just be a defensive response. Regardless of their motives, these creatures are clearly prepared for war.

The campaign's player character, Nomad...if you had to compare him to any characters or roles from action films, who does he resemble?
Greg: Nomad is a highly trained special forces operative, part of that elite team sent in to retrieve the missing archeologists. He's an ordinary guy with extraordinary skills. No amount of training could prepare him for the events in Crysis, but his unfaltering determination to complete the mission sees him through in the end. If we had to compare Nomad to a character from a popular action film...it would probably be Corporal Hicks from Aliens, in that he's sympathetic, level-headed, and rises above his rank to become a hero.

Who does Nomad report to once he and the squad leave the off-shore carrier and start working their way through the island?
Sten: Nomad's unit is led by Special Forces veteran Major Lawrence Barnes, call-sign Prophet. Barnes hand-picked his team, a diverse, but tight-knit squad, from the world's elite soldiers. They specialize in black ops, clandestine operations beneath the political radar. Equipped with state-of-the art Nanosuits, these men are at the top of their game. The squad is in constant contact with Joint Special Operations Command via the interface in their Nanosuits' tactical display, using a GPS guidance system to identify objectives. Ultimately, they're free to make their own tactical decisions in the field in response to evolving situations.

It's not exactly easy to replace an elite nanosuit soldier in the middle of the jungle. What happens when a squad member dies in Crysis?
Sten: If a squad mate dies, the team must improvise and adapt to survive without him. There are no reinforcements.





The devastating XM102 shoulder-mounted rocket launcher is the bane of heavy vehicles.

interview

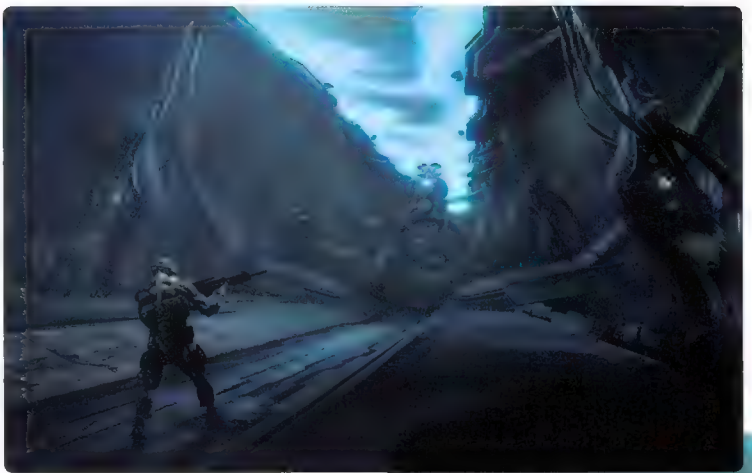
Greg Sarjeant – Senior Designer / Story Supervisor, Crytek
Sten Hubler – Lead Level Designer, Crytek

Arthur C. Clarke once suggested that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." The blend of biological and mechanical elements used by the Crysis aliens is a few light years removed from fairy dust.

play: Every invasion force must have structure. How much intel has the US gathered about the aliens' force?
Greg: Very little is known about the creatures or their social organization, but there does appear to be a hierarchical order. Their battle units consist of mechanical exo-suits that employ diverse tactics during combat. Preliminary data suggests there is a collective hive mentality to the species. Thermal scans of their environment identify a large biological entity which extends throughout their habitat. It has been suggested that this entity has a controlling influence over the creatures' behavior, but this is yet to be confirmed.

We've seen the Scout, Trooper and Hunter units; the aliens are rather spindly, tentacled and squid-like. Do they all use pre-cautionary measures against our atmosphere and gravity, like protective armor, thrusters and so forth?
Greg: The creatures don't venture outside their self-made environment without the protection of mechanical exo-suits. Inside their own habitat they exist in an extremely cold, zero-g environment, therefore we believe they are unable to survive in the outside world without exo-suit protection. Upon their discovery, the creatures expanded a vast sphere of ice, flash-freezing the surrounding jungle.

They definitely know how to stay cool. This molecular manipulation that the aliens use, how exactly does it work in a weapon like the Molecular Accelerator gun? Can the wielder endlessly suck more ice ammo out of thin air?
Sten: The Mo-Ac decelerates molecules from the surrounding atmosphere, in the case of Earth, water molecules, and compacts them into deadly shards of ice, which it then accelerates towards its target. Since the weapon creates its own ammunition there is no need for reloading, but it does need time to charge up. The weapon can also suffer from over-cooling if used for a prolonged period of time.



The aliens' ship is a bleak techno-organic colossus where players will deal with deep freeze, zero gravity combat and plenty of destruction.

OK, interplanetary travel, exo-suits, gravity control, molecular accelerators...so why don't the aliens have anything as sweet as the nanosuit?
Greg: With a range of armored exo-suits and their devastating weapons, the creatures are more than a match for their human foes. The nanosuit levels the playing field, but players need to master the suit functions in order to achieve success against the invaders.

interview

Greg Sarjeant
Sten Hubler

Cliffs, rocks and buildings are spaced out for maximum nanosuit mirth and mayhem. You can dash across rooftops like a skipping stone while the human AI chats, patrols, smokes and repairs vehicles in the camp below.

play: The nanosuit's muscular design is great; all those corded tendons... How tough was it to tweak the suits attributes to work against the enemies in the campaign and against other players in the multiplayer?
Bernd: To make sure that the nanosuit feels fun to play, we did a long series of gameplay prototypes we called Playgrounds. In these prototypes, we tweaked the nanosuit over and over again—the interface, the energy levels, damage settings, jump height and so on until it felt just right. One of the later Playgrounds became so popular that it evolved into our main show demo. In multiplayer, it was a natural fit; from the first tests it became clear really fast that players loved using it. I miss it when playing other games.

What's the final timing like on the suit, in terms of how quickly a player can cycle through the suit's modes in the midst of combat?
We have two main interfaces for using the nanosuit—one is the middle mouse button quick menu. It is very easy to learn and use and that is important for us, since basically everybody will be a beginner where the nanosuit is concerned. For quicker access, we have quick keys to switch suit modes without having to use the mouse. It means you can switch so fast that we actually had to adjust the feedback on the HUD to keep up with it. Especially in our multiplayer matches, we see the most amazing sequences players do with the nanosuit modes.

"Especially in our multiplayer matches, we see the most amazing sequences players do with the nanosuit modes."

Bernd Dietner – Senior Designer, Crytek

Could a few people in nanosuits pound the crap out of a jeep or helicopter using the suit's strength mode?
Yes, yes they can—very much fun in multiplayer. In the single player campaign, one of my favorite moves is to stand in the road and let a LTV drive towards you, then do a quick matador sidestep and give it a strength punch as it drives past. If you get the timing and angle just right, it goes flying.

Does the awesome nanosuit finally meet its match in the game's harrowing zero-G sections aboard the alien vessel? Must take a lot of energy to avoid all those nasty wall spikes while taking on swarms of guards...
Fortunately, the Nanosuit is able to handle basic movement even in zero-G—it means you can save your suit energy for something really satisfying, like grabbing the Aliens and throwing them around.

Let's talk challenge. Far Cry was a pretty good run. The last two sections were insane. We imagine by the time the North Korean and US forces decide to team up and take on the aliens, all hell breaks loose. Is Crysis going to be another ball-buster of a campaign?
We will have difficulty settings to fit every gamers needs. Easy is tailored to the casual player, but we'll make sure that the intensity is still there. Balancing for us doesn't mean deleting AI or making them deaf and blind. We developed a balancing tool called Rate of Death which allows us to dynamically tune the complete combat experience. The harder modes will be epic and a real challenge for hardcore players.

interview

– Lead Multiplayer Designer, Crytek
– Development Manager, Crytek

Deathmatch and Tactical Deathmatch for a quick scrimmage, Power Struggle for the Battlefield lovers and large map fanatics. Control Jeeps, tanks, VTOLs, choppers and one nasty nuke. Seize factories and expand your arsenal. Raise your rank.

play: When it comes to weapon loadouts in multiplayer, how do you determine the amount of points a player has to spend on gear? Do the North Koreans and American get different stuff?
Eric: We chose to give access to all weapons and items to both the US and NK teams. Some of the equipment is only accessible after achieving certain conditions; for example, access to alien weapons and the most high-powered vehicles is only available to the side that is in control of a particular factory that can produce it. We also use the prestige system—the in game currency used to buy equipment—which gives us a lot of flexibility when balancing equipment costs. We make sure the player always spawns with enough money to buy basic equipment and then scale this income based on his rank. For example, as a private you may start with 200 prestige. As a Lieutenant you may spawn with 350 prestige. These values are constant and do not add to the amount of prestige you had when you died; It only ensures you never spawn with less than those amounts, to make sure you're always able to buy equipment.

How did you balance the vehicles in Crysis knowing that players have nanosuits which defy the same laws of physics that the vehicles are attempting to adhere to?
Eric: We always wanted the suit to be a vehicle the player is wearing, in that it allows you to be more protected or move more quickly depending on the mode you chose. The suit will allow players to customize their battles, giving infantry a little more of a chance verses heavy vehicles. At the same time, we wanted to make sure this didn't cheapen the effect of our vehicles, which are still very powerful against infantry. Tanks and armored vehicles will always have the upper hand against a player in a nanosuit, but the most skilled players will be able to learn various ways of avoiding them. With the suit, players get a chance to escape with speed mode or take a round or two from a vehicle's machine gun in armor mode. Players can also sneak up on vehicles with the suit's cloaking and inflict damage or even flip over light vehicles with the strength punch.

The Power Struggle mode seems perfect for large-scale multiplayer fans. Let's hear about some of your favorite moments in the Power Struggle rounds you've played...
Chris: Let's see...My first favorite moment was driving a LTV jeep through a tunnel at full speed and being shot at by a sniper crouching at one end. He managed to nail my front tire causing me to hit the curved side of the tunnel and do a barrel roll out of the tunnel, smashing him with the roof of the vehicle and then crashing into a ravine below in a fiery explosion. It was the most ridiculous and hilarious thing I've ever seen.

My second favorite moment: being inside a TAC—our nuke tank—on my way to the enemy base, escorted by a friendly tank. Suddenly two enemy tanks showed up and killed my chaperone. I screamed, "You'll never take me alive!" and shot them point blank with a thermonuclear shell, much to the dismay of my teammates.

That's beautiful stuff. How deep is the vehicular damage system?
Chris: We have a component based damage system for all vehicles that can be individually broken or repaired. For example, tires can be shot out, tank tracks can be disabled with mines or explosives, fuel tanks on LTV's can be detonated and aircraft engines can be shot-out to increase damage.

Once again, you allow mix and matching of all weapon attachments. Were there any particularly overpowered combinations that required extra tuning?
Chris: Not so far, all the combinations have been pretty simple to get working together. We did have a problem with the LAM laser attachment adding additional accuracy to weapons and basically turning them into railguns, especially when combined with a silencer and a scope on a regular rifle.

We like the idea that Crysis emphasizes nanosuit-based multiplayer, where a stealthy player can go in and pick the lock on enemy vehicles while a brute force player might crash through the roof. Must be tricky to balance that kind of stuff...
Chris: The real difficulty is finding a good medium between the two. We made the decision, for example, to allow players to stealth whenever they want as part of their suit modes. As long as they didn't move too much or shoot, it would allow players to be stealthy whenever they please. Players can switch the suit mode to strength or armor and just run in and shoot things without fear of getting instantly killed. Players who want to be fast and run at high speed and jump around will be able to, but the trade off for them is a big reduction in armor. One grenade and they're probably going to be toast.

> "...tires can be shot out, tank tracks can be disabled with mines or explosives, fuel tanks on LTV's can be detonated and aircraft engines can be shot-out to increase damage."
>
> Eric Legal - Development Manager, Crytek

interview

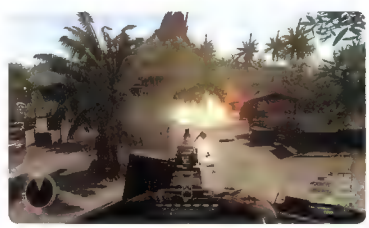
– Lead Level Designer

Step into tomorrow

A stunningly shaded ocean, hemoglobin levels calculated beneath the skin of meticulously normal-mapped models, and effects like radiance transfer (think of a Coke can casting red color on a wall) that no other real-time game engine is doing.

play: Cry-Engine 2 is going to cause a paradigm shift in the way outdoor areas are rendered in games. Huge displays of reactive motion and destructibility...nary a Havok or PhysX to be found. How are you doing it?
Sten: After we first showed the breakable trees at E3 2006, I think players would no longer accept an environment where trees didn't break. The main challenge in development is to be consistent and follow the design to its logical conclusion. We didn't stop at breaking the trees—you can actually pick up the pieces as well and use them as cover or melee weapons. Having a stellar R&D department that constantly manages to pull off impossible requests from us designers helps a lot.

There's a lot going on here. Your day-to-night cycle uses an amazing lighting technique, you're doing per-pixel stuff few games dare to touch, crazy weather, gravity manipulation... are all these effects built into the game's Sandbox editor, and thus available for everyone to use in their own custom creations when Crysis ships?
The Sandbox Editor that we will provide to the community is identical to the one we use in day-to-day development of Crysis. We're really looking forward to the great things our community will do with the tools we provide to them. We have mod teams working with a pre-release SDK right now and what they are doing already looks fantastic. Check out our Crymod community portal for more cool projects at www.crymod.com.



FreeStyle Street Basketball

Rise of the sports MMO

Sierra Online's FreeStyle Street Basketball is a new kind of massively multiplayer experience that brings competitive sports to the online genre. FreeStyle allows thousands of players to go online, find each other, chat, level-up, trade items, play in tournaments, track records and manage a skill system. It's all about cool cell-shaded graphics, stylish half-courts, huge moves, exclusive music, custom clothes, and plenty of attitude. The characters you bring to this online arena are created from scratch and yours to keep as you rock the rim, earning dozens of moves while improving your game.

Don't let FreeStyle's vibrant exterior fool you: you'll need to use solid positional basketball sense to win in this game. Where you might choose a warrior or cleric in the usual MMO, FreeStyle's fast-paced gameplay belongs to the true masters of the court: the Guard, Forward and Center. The FreeStyle Guard is the ultimate traffic coordinator. Like Steve Nash, they're smaller, faster and great at draining three-pointers. The FreeStyle Center is the consummate rebounder: think of what Shaq or Stoudemire can bring to a game. They set up camp deep in the paint and manhandle stray rebounds. Like this year's MVP Dirk Nowitski, the FreeStyle Forward is a strong position that can rebound, dunk, and consistently nail game-saving medium range shots. FreeStyle's controls are incredibly easy to pick-up, so find a role that fits your playing style and start training!

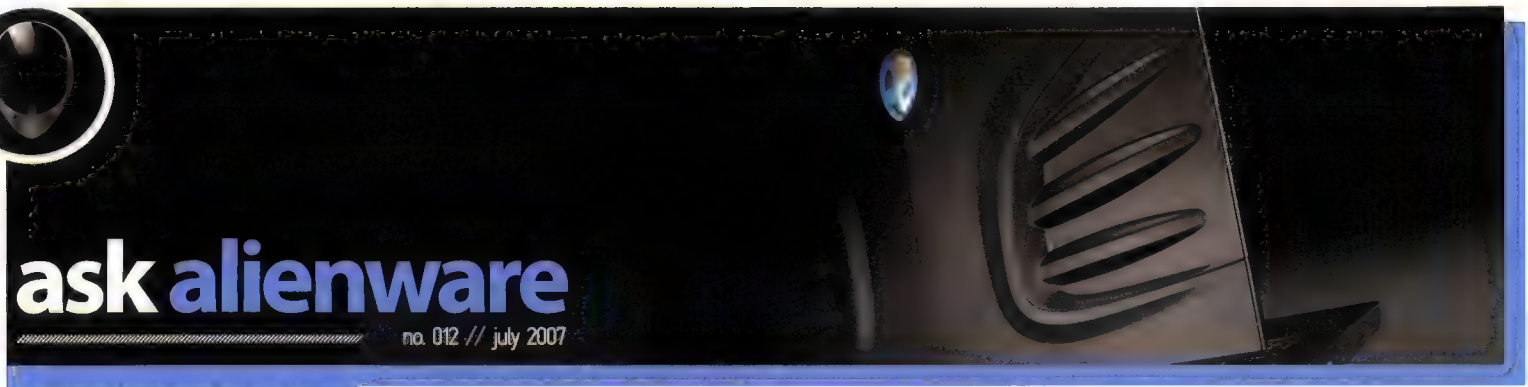
There's a vast range of cool apparel to buy for your FreeStyle characters from real labels like Ecko Unlimited, G-Unit, Zoo York, Avirex, and Elwood. Some of these clothes will impart bonuses to attributes such as jumping, rebounding and dunking, so you'll make a fashion statement on the scoreboard as your character develops a unique appearance. Further reinforcing the game's stylish urban vibe, FreeStyle features killer beats from one of hip hop's biggest producers, Sha Money XL—the maestro behind albums from Tupac, 50 Cent and Lloyd Banks. Sierra Online is already in the process of securing more hot clothing for both male and female ballers, and new music tracks to accompany every butterfly dunk, pounding rejection, and glorious 3-point bomb.

One of FreeStyle Street Basketball's best features is that it's free to try. A trial account will let you create a character and drive the hoop to level 15. To play all 45 levels, you can upgrade to a full account by purchasing the retail box at a local game store or by upgrading your trial account online. In any case, it's only $20 to upgrade, and in return you'll gain some handy in-game Bills that can be used to buy shirts, pants, shoes, tattoos and more. Whether you're honing your gameplay on a free trial account or battling in the pro leagues with a full account, FreeStyle will never require a monthly fee. So what are you waiting for? For instant gratification, point your web browser to the following address: freestyle.sierraonline.com/createaccount. We'll see you on the court, playa'.

FreeStyle Street Basketball	
System(s)	PC
Developer	JCE
Publisher	Sierra Online
Online/Multi	Thousands
Available	Now

The Item Shop grows larger every month.

Slick visuals that any PC can handle.



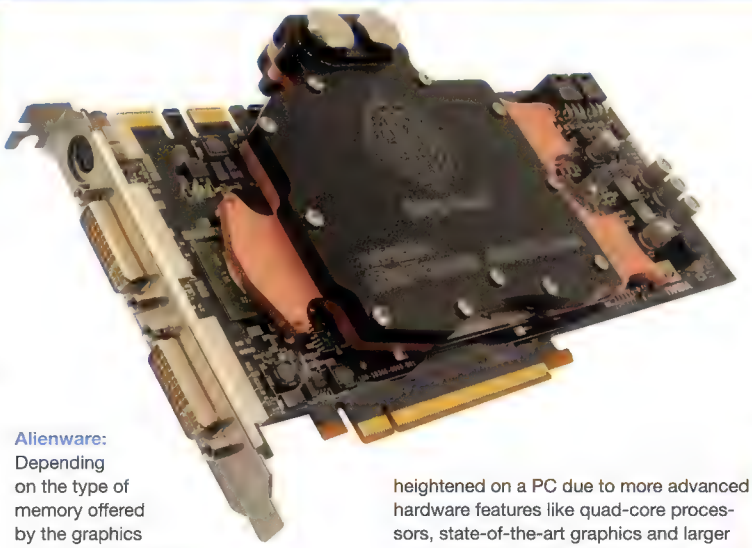
ask alienware

no. 012 // july 2007

q. **What's the best type of liquid to use in my watercooling system? Right now I'm just using distilled water. When I Google it, I see all kinds of wacky recommendations like anti-freeze and Prestone. Call me crazy, but putting automotive fluids inside my computer seems odd. Any suggestions? Obviously I want a top notch coolant but I also want it to last many months before needing a refill.** Will, CA

Alienware: Although water will work, a better option for keeping your system cool is a 50/50 mixture of antifreeze and distilled water. You also want to be careful not to use too thick of a liquid. Otherwise, you could cause the pump to malfunction from pushing overly dense liquids through your system.

q. **I realize that these are impossible to compare straight up, but some extra info really can't hurt. If I'm choosing a single graphics card solution, how much performance do you really gain by jumping from 512 MB to 768 MB? Do current PC titles even know how to use that much video memory? I'm familiar with computers so you can use tech jargon and such.** Carson, BC.



Alienware: Depending on the type of memory offered by the graphics card, you could enjoy a significant performance increase. For example, a 768MB GDDR3 card can give you a 25% increase in performance over a 512MB GDDR2 card. Game developers like to push the limits of performance in order to ensure the most immersive gameplay possible. That's why they design the latest games with increased graphics memory and other future technology advancements in mind, such as faster core clock speeds and more pixel pipelines.

q. **I'm curious to know what Alienware thinks about cross-platform gameplay between PC and console, especially in genres like first-person shooters. It's going to start very soon on Windows Live and that means many of Alienware's customers will start thinking about it. How could PC and console possibly compete on even ground when you factor in PC peripherals?** Kevin, TX.

Alienware: The presence of cross-platform gaming will increase with the utilization of Microsoft XNA development software. Cross-platform gaming will be heightened on a PC due to more advanced hardware features like quad-core processors, state-of-the-art graphics and larger memory sizes. Peripherals give PC gamers another distinct edge thanks to the superior accuracy of a keyboard and mouse over a game controller.

q. **I was planning to build my own computer. I love to game and have about a $1300 price range. Before I piece it together myself, I wanted to know what components I should prioritize for it to run as fast a possible. Thanks.** Graeme, NY.

Alienware: One component that should be at the top of any gamer's list is a DirectX 10-compatible graphics card. That way, you'll be able to run the emerging new generation of DirectX 10 games. For optimum performance, you'll also want to be sure to get a dual-core processor, along with as much memory as your budget will allow.

"...be careful not to use too thick of a liquid. Otherwise, you could cause the pump to malfunction."

q. **What's the best way to build a server PC for gaming? Like if I wanted a dedicated machine just to host multiplayer games for a bunch of my friends. I don't need any fancy graphics or sound in that box, right?** Brad, NS.

Alienware: Bandwidth is key when hosting multiplayer games. The more people you host, the more bandwidth you will need. Ping speed is also important; generally, the lower the ping, the better. As far as hardware, you will need a dual-core or quad-core processor, as well as 4GB of memory and a high-RPM hard drive. You won't, however, require a high-end graphics card or sound solution.

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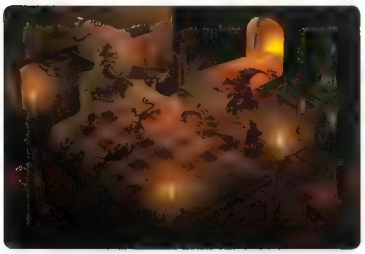
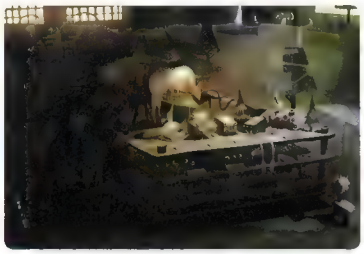
GameTap to publish American McGee's Grimm

Coming to GameTap early next year in episodic form, American McGee's Grimm will find a good home on Turner's popular online game and entertainment destination. Spanning an impressive 24 episodes, McGee and developer Spicy Horse will oversee the re-imagining of classic Brothers Grimm tales like Snow White, Rumplestiltskin and Little Red Riding Hood. American McGee has been down this re-interpreted rabbit hole before in his Alice game, so an adventure into Grimm's classics seems like a perfect fit. "My interpretation of these classic fables will provide gamers with an entertaining and interactive way of experiencing how the stories were originally meant to unfold," said American McGee, officially onboard as the series' creative director. Boasting a sandbox world, twisted characters, and story-driven gameplay filled with cliffhangers, Grimm is one of the more intriguing episodic efforts on the horizon.





Dungeon Runners begins its campaign on PlayNC

NCsoft has officially rolled out Dungeon Runners, a new free-to-play online action RPG now available through its PlayNC game launcher. Dungeon Runners can be summed up like so: Diablo-style gameplay in a persistent online format. Many of the best equipment options won't be available to a free subscriber, but don't fret. In a bold move, NCsoft is introducing an incredibly affordable $4.99/month fee for a full Dungeon Runners account. Remove one Starbucks drink from your daily intake, presto—subscription paid.

BBC broadcasts in Second Life

In early June, Linden Lab's online world Second Life played host to its first BBC broadcast. The BBC's long-running financial show The Money Programme aired at the (in-game) Rivers Run Red Cinema, where the topic of the hour was virtual world economies. Analysts have predicted a tripling in MMO revenues by 2012, and everybody wants a piece. Second Life is perhaps most famous for turning one woman into a real-life millionaire via the game's unique stock exchange and virtual estate sales.

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When They Cry

ひぐらしの鳴く頃に

Tears of Blood

words Dave Halverson

There's an old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. In no other walk of entertainment does that apply to quite the extent it does with anime. Show me any new show's key art and I can pretty much ballpark what the gist is. Not so with Geneon's *When They Cry*. I've run up against nebulous titles in my day… *Fruits Basket, Kiddy Grade, FLCL, Dead Leaves* (makes you wonder who thinks up this stuff), but the images always tell the story. My first inclination when I saw the *WTC* art was a promiscuous show about forbidden love between siblings… I wasn't even in the stratosphere. Even viewing the first episode things felt pretty by-the-numbers. The producers drop an A-bomb to suggest foul play but nothing to prepare you for what unfolds as Keiichi Maebara adjusts to his new life and friends in rural Hinamizawa.

As much as I hate to go any further I'll send you on your way (hopefully to get a copy) by introducing his new circle of friends—Rena, Mion, Satoko, and Rika…all adorably cute girls. We should all be so lucky, eh? By episode 4 you'll be wetting your pants...but then come episode 5, Cotton Drifting, you'll just be scratching your head a lot. I have no idea what to except from Volume 2. I looked for M. Night Shyamalan's name in the credits, but nothing. Then again, he may not have the stomach for this one.

When They Cry — Score: 9.0

+	One of the more unique shows around (based on plausible events). Wonderfully produced and paced.
-	Character designs are a tad peculiar

Released By	Geneon Entertainment
Volume	1
Running Time	125 minutes
Episodes	5
Rating	16+
Available	June 5

"The producers drop an A-bomb to suggest foul play but nothing to prepare you for what unfolds."

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BECK

Mongolian Chop Squad

Rock of nations

Heather Campbell

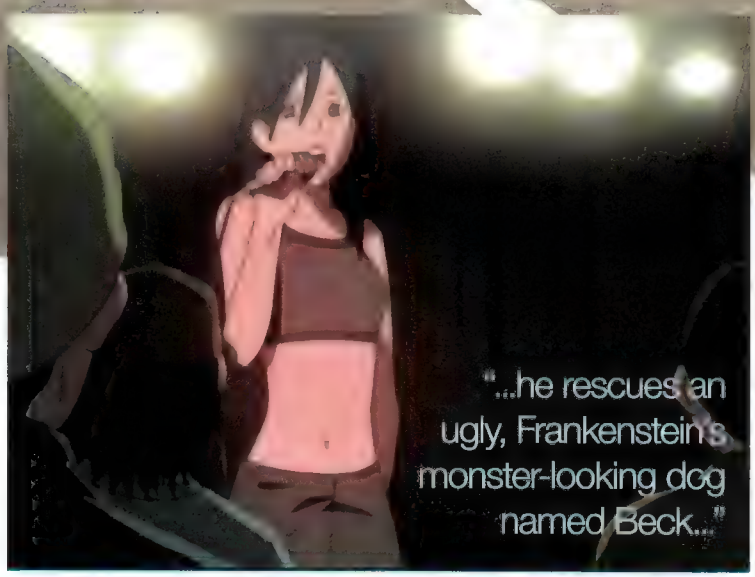
I applaud Funimation for their bravery. I really do. *Beck* is one of the most Japanese series I've ever seen. I'm not talking about the standard "wacky" comedies that we so frequently label as specifically Asian. I'm not talking about the feudal historic action shows that pull from old Kyoto lore. I'm not even trying to reference *Genshiken*, the anime about anime, set in a high-school club obsessed with Akihabara. All of these are accessible to western audiences with a certain sensibility, or experience with anime.

What makes *Beck* Japanese is that I believe it only works if English is your second language. It's the weirdest thing anyone could import. The story centers on the young loser Yukio (aka Koyuki) who is in the crushing grip of a young-life crisis. Robbed of his identity by the cold disregard of adolescence, Koyuki is lost until he reunites with old friend Maho Minami.

Soon after this chance encounter, he rescues an ugly, Frankenstein's monster-looking dog named Beck from a gang of callous children. Koyuki befriends Beck's owner, and begins a journey of self-discovery. Minami Ryusuke, Koyuki's new friend, has a band named after his dog… and a certain internationally famous singer. Koyuki is hungry to join, so he begins to learn the guitar. And so, we find ourselves in a coming-of-age drama, set along the edges of an independent band in search of a label.

Forget that our early copy was sans sub-titles (Japanese is my second language); what I'm curious to see is what Funimation does with the English voice-acting. As it is, the show was sometimes particularly vulgar in its original form. When Koyuki runs into some army-base punks in Episode 1, they spew language that would make…well, sailors blush. Will this be retained in the American release, or will Funimation add a little English polish to an otherwise golden show?

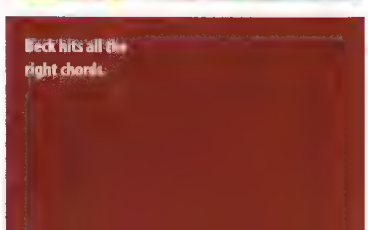
The quirky flavor of Japanese kids throwing out a little American slang is going to be hard to recapture with a full English cast. Maybe, just maybe, Funi will show us the English actors throwing out some broken Japanese to retain the idea for our local audience. One thing's for sure: they're pulling out all the stops. The special edition release of the first episode is a collector's dream.

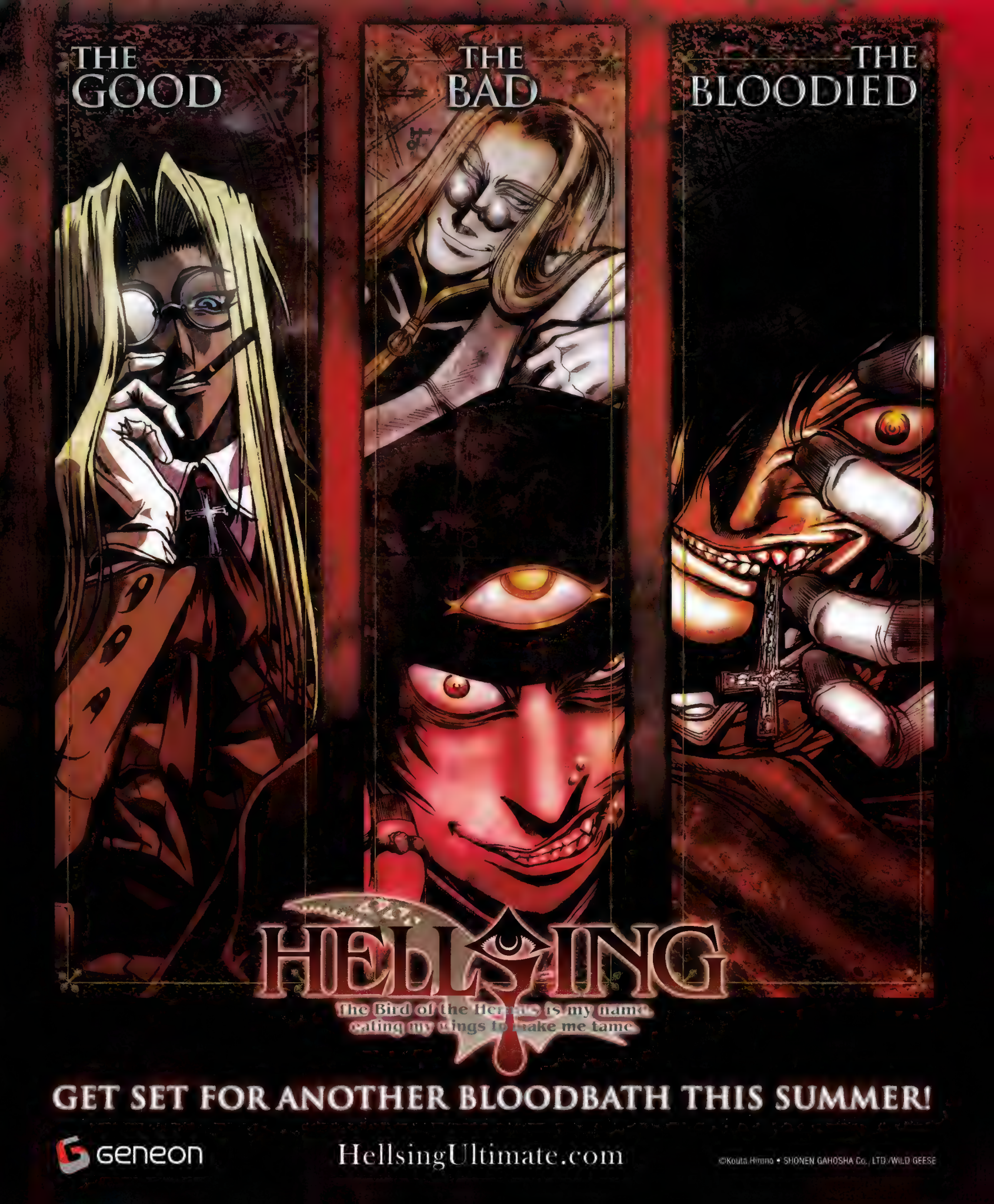


BECK
Mongolian Chop Squad
score **8.5**

+	Gorgeous scene design, and catchy, realistic characters
–	English scenes are weirder than weird.

Released By	FUNimation Productions
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	1-5
Rating	TBA
Available	July 10, 2007

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Rozen Maiden

Welcome to the Doll House

words Bill Gray

About halfway through the third episode of *Rozen Maiden*, I came to a disturbing realization: I was watching a show about a boy and his dolls—and I was liking it. Freaked out, I shut off the show, dusted my Optimus Prime figurine one last time, and went to bed dreaming about miniature nattily-dressed Victorian women with attitudes, or I would have if I still had my Optimus Prime Transformer.

A show about a boy and his talking dolls has to feature a pretty messed up protagonist, and Rozen Maiden is no exception. Devastated after a poor showing on an entrance exam to junior high school, Jun Sakurada retreats into his room and becomes a "hikikomori" like Tatsuhiro from *Welcome to the NHK*. For the uninitiated, a hikikomori is a societal outcast by choice, usually an adolescent, who isolates himself for intensely personal reasons.

Everything changes when Jun receives an odd letter, which he assumes is from a voodoo doll-making company. Filling out the form and throwing it in a drawer, he trips over an ornate box that somehow appeared in his room. Opening the coffin-like case, Jun finds a strange doll dressed in ornate Victorian clothing, which he naively winds up, only to have the doll come alive and firmly slap him in the face for being "fresh."

Jun plays with dolls...Or do they play with him?

"A show about a boy and his talking dolls has to feature a pretty messed up protagonist..."

Thus Jun meets Shinku, the living doll in question, and his days of isolation come to a forcible end. A pint-sized aristocrat, Shinku is by turns the show's comic relief and action hero. Though too small to reach a door handle, she has no qualms about peremptorily commanding Jun to open it for her, only to slap him again for picking her up wrong, something that's repeated often and never ceases to leave me in stitches.

As one of the Rozen Maiden dolls, Shinku must eliminate all of the other Rozen dolls in the so-called "Alice game." This violent affair consists of each doll using the energy of its medium—a regular human being like Jun—to do battle. The winner assimilates all of the power of the defeated doll and the loser becomes a lifeless lump of dressed-up wood. Jun is pressed into Shinku's service in short order when an evil clown doll attacks him with razor-sharp playing cards, beginning their adventure together.

At turns funny, tragic and action-packed, Maiden reminds me of another Geneon release, *Fate//Stay Night*, only with cute dolls battling it out instead of legendary heroes. Taken as a whole, the series defies simple categorization—it's too violent in places to be suitable for kids, and too slow and character-driven to appeal to action anime fans. With sumptuous animation, spot-on dubbing work, and well-done situational humor, Rozen Maiden is worth winding up.

Rozen Maiden score **8.0**

Funny, psychologically dark, well-animated. What's not to like?

Oh that's right—the snickers you'll endure for liking a show about dolls.

Released By	Geneon Entertainment
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	4
Rating	13+
Available	Now

Vampire Hunter D

Talk to the hand

If the Vampire Hunter D manga was a retelling of the original anime or the more recent theatrical Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust it would be cause for celebration, but the fact that it's a liberal adaptation of the sullen Damphir's travels makes it a veritable event. Set in a post-apocalyptic future after mankind nukes itself to near extinction, the world of D is a neo-frontier ruled by the mutants and vampires that emerged from the fallout. After 5000 years of aristocratic rule and tyranny the other genus spawned from the fallout, Vampire Hunters have begun to tip the scales. Among them is the omni-powerful D, half vampire, half human, unilaterally undesirable (unless you're in need of his services) and lethal to the core. A lone horseman who travels the land protecting what's left of humankind and annihilating any mutants that cross his path, his only friend is the face living in the palm of his hand and the people whose lives he helps sustain. Known for its elegant design, the manga, illustrated by Saiko Takaki, follows suit, although it is somewhat grittier and laced with its share of tasteful nudity.

Read it if... You dare.

Vampire Hunter D	score 8.5
Publisher	Digital Manga Publishing
Volume	1
Story	Saiko Takaki
Art	Saiko Takaki
Genre	Fantasy/Horror
Pages	NA
Rating	16 and up
Available	July

Vampire of destruction

War Angels

Heaven on Earth

"Holy Mother!" I couldn't help but smile every time I read that exclamation in War Angels, Jae-Hwan Kim's latest manwha epic. You see, in a post-apocalyptic world in the not-so-distant future, there actually is a Holy Mother, the last hope for humankind against the mutated Beasterians. And, as she is captured about four pages into the story, I smiled a lot reading this manga.

Kim's action-packed saga comes soaked in blood and riddled with bullets. In Kim's personal book of Revelations, Angels are human beings granted special powers in order to protect ordinary Joes like you and me. After Tyron, an unusually philosophical, and powerful, Beasterian, takes the Holy Mother prisoner, a trio of Angels receive the unenviable task of recovering her—Nikki, a Blaze Fielding-look-a-like who's a walking arsenal; Ross, a wisecracking young swordsman; and Tae, our strong, silent hero.

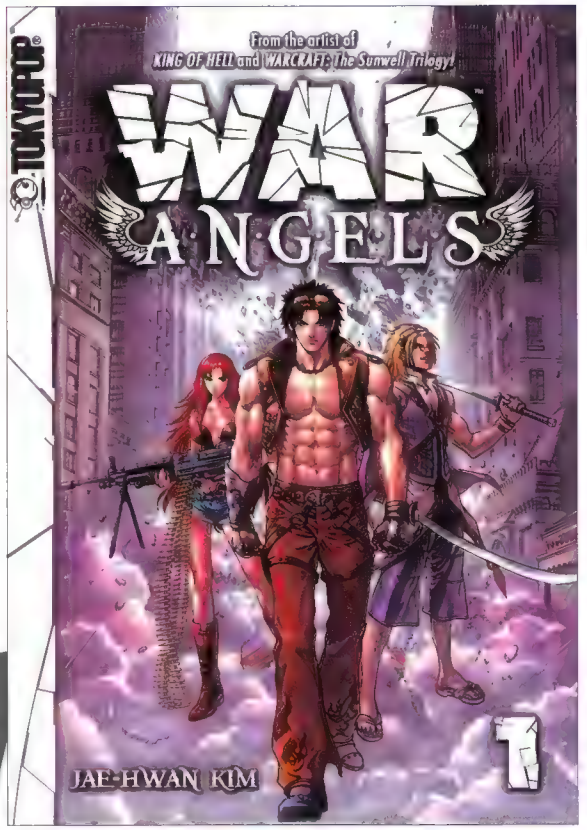
The three have the misfortune of meeting in a town that's about to be torn apart by Beasterians, thanks to Ross and Tae rescuing a young girl and her father from a particularly nasty beast. And so, Seven Samurai-style, the three must defend the village and try to recover the Holy Mother along the way.

Long on artistic detail and fast-paced action, Angels is an entertaining ride. Kim's masterful pencil and ink work leaps off the page, but without a thought-provoking story or compelling character to hold my interest, Nikki, Ross and Tae end up more like angel-food cake than killer angels.

Read it if... you like your manga pretty but shallow.

War Angels	score 7.0
Publisher	Tokyopop
Volume	1
Story	Jae-Hwan Kim
Art	Jae-Hwan Kim
Genre	Action/Fantasy
Pages	192
Rating	16 and up
Available	July

Nothing like Charlie's



TMNT

Movie: Extras:

Directed by: Kevin Munroe
Starring: Patrick Stewart, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Laurence Fishburne, Mako, Ziyi Zhang, Mitchell Whitfield, James Arnold Taylor, Mikey Kelley, Nolan North
Released By: Warner Bros./Imagi
Rated:

Although I've seen *TMNT* three times on the big screen, over the weeks since I've found myself counting the days to the DVD release—partly due to the bonus material producer Kevin Munroe spoke of off the record in our interview for Rocket (our movie magazine) and partly because I'm simply in love with this film. As a long-time TMNT fan dating back to the original comics—still my TMNT of choice—for my money this is the closest anyone has come to portraying the Turtles as they should be; individuals dealing with their calling to fight crime and the personal and inner strife associated with family and life as an outcast. I know it sounds silly, but you're either all the way in or not. To me a great CGI performance, be it from a car, chicken, or mutant turtle, is on par with any live actor. As a CGI film, *TMNT* breaks down barriers, entertains across a wide spectrum, and brings back one of entertainment's most dynamic families. It's a real film. Unlike the vast majority of CGI movies, *TMNT* travels to multiple locations, features complex story arcs and character development, and contains moments of real peril and dissension. It's as close to PG-13 that PG has ever come. It can hold a 6-year-old's attention without humiliating core fans in their 30s and 40s, and that's saying something. It's also simply gorgeous, somehow on par with films costing 5-6 times more. Imagi is the studio to watch; no doubt about it.

Not only does *TMNT* look astounding on an HD display but when it comes to extras, Imagi and Warner Bros. spared no expense (well, okay, maybe they spared a little—there was talk of a special 2-disc collector's edition). The DVD includes commentary by writer/director Kevin Munroe, an alternate opening telling Splinter's back story, Casey and April in an alternate ending, deleted scenes including Mikey sneaking food to Splinter, side-by-side comparison of storyboards and CGI action, and interviews with voice talent Patrick Stewart, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Laurence Fishburne and the filmmakers. That's a whole lotta TMNT.

"As a CGI film TMNT breaks down barriers, entertains across a wide spectrum, and brings back one of entertainment's most dynamic families.

The quality of the CGI given the budget is beyond belief.

Kevin Munroe (center) sets a scene.

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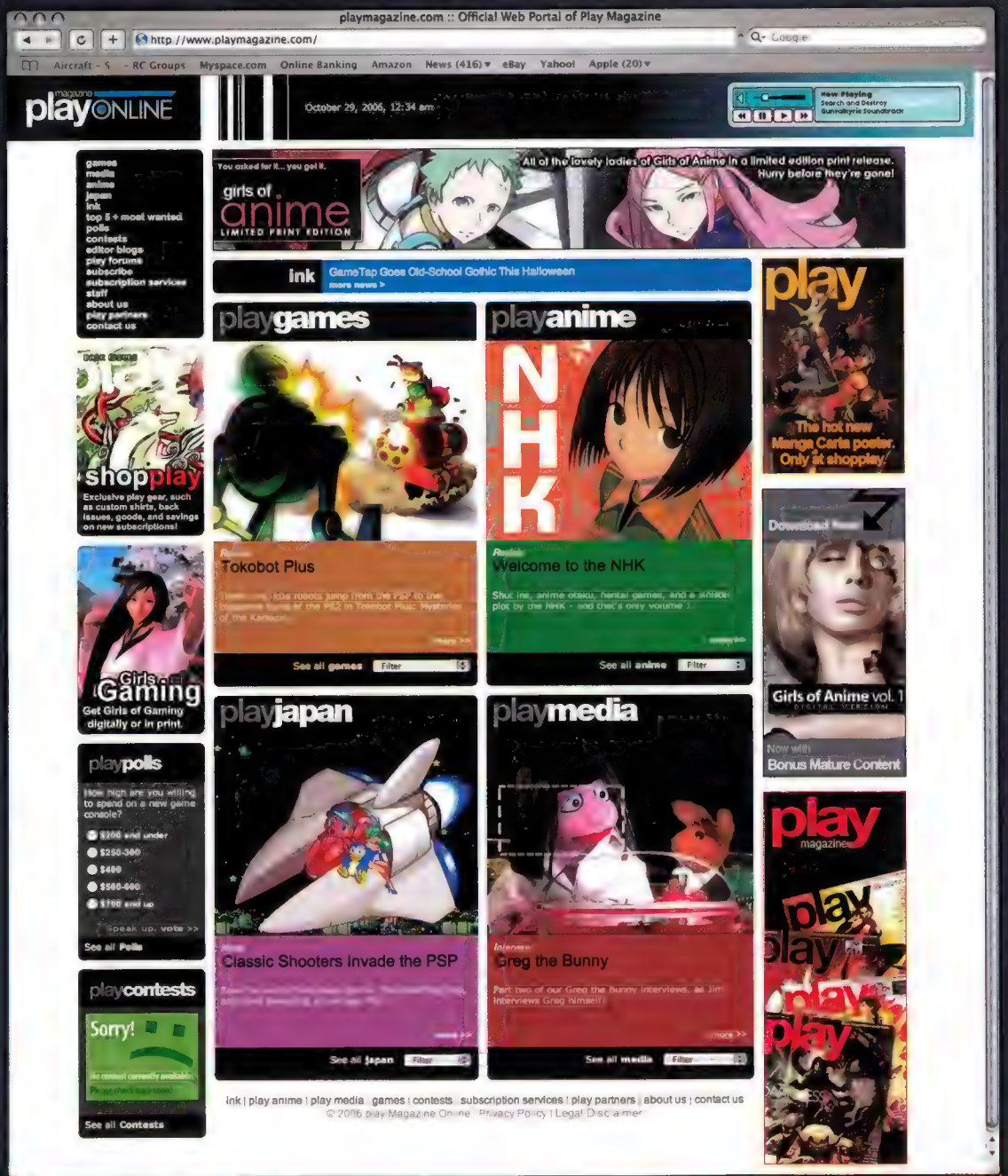
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BACK OF THE BOOK

07_07 GREG ORLANDO
SENIOR EDITOR

The 10...

On this day, you can consider me a modern-day Moses without the beard and certainly without the pretension. God hasn't spoken to me, and I'm certainly not delusional enough to think that these 10 commandments I am about to deliver you are anything more than common sense coming down not from the mountain but rather some ratty couch in an undisclosed fortress somewhere in San Francisco's North Beach.

Commandment the first: Thou shalt make me feel ...

The next great leap in video games will not be seen with graphics. We can all fall to our knees in collective praise of realistic cloth rendering, sweat physics, and lighting effects. Lord knows we couldn't imagine, say, Shaquille O' Neal, say, as a dripping puddle under the hot lights or that his shadow was cast in a fashion that was true-to-life. Gamemakers will continue to press onward, enlightening the masses with stuff with realistic nose hair physics or earwax shading, and we'll all be much, much better for it.

The true revolution, however, will come when games can make us think, or feel, or laugh, or cry.

Very few games have ever achieved this simple feat. Mostly, the game industry deals in archetypes and cookie-cutter heroes. We see vaguely androgynous manchild and Princess #5032 practicing their laughing in a cut-scene and we feel, what? Slightly disturbed at the sight? A little embarrassed at the awkwardness of it all? Ashamed at having waded through 35 hours of play for something that may well have been written by a robot fresh off the production line?

Technology is not the problem. Planetfall and its sequel Stationfall were text-based adventures, and both managed to create a lovable character in the robot Floyd. When Floyd bit it, it was a genuinely sad moment—and not because the game had a weepy death scene with depressing music and grief-stricken heroes weeping over the corpse. It was a sad moment because the game took the time and effort to make Floyd believable. It was a perfect example of show and not tell. And to this day, only a few games such as Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath, Psychonauts, and Pikmin have even tried to stab at creating emotional content. We could all stand to feel.

Commandment the Second: Thou shalt not escort idiots...

Nothing can spoil a game more quickly than escort missions. Simply, they're the Chinese water torture of gaming.

Frankly, the idea that I should have to risk my life—even within the context of a video game—for an idiot is absurd. I'm sorry, but if you're urinating in the kiddie part of the gene pool, maybe we should consider your grisly demise at the hands of bloodthirsty gangs or ravenous zombies or what-have-you a blessing.

I swear, once I gave a handbag to a woman in a video game and told her to follow me to safety. And I'm not joking when I say I watched as she ran out of her way to attack three monsters.

Out of her way.

To whack three monsters.

With a purse.

I tried to explain to her exactly how stupid she was, but she couldn't hear me. She was whacking three monsters. With her purse.

She's dead now. Good riddance.

Commandment the third: Less with the yappiness, okay?

Brevity is the soul of wit, William Shakespeare wrote, and game designers would do well to take this to heart.

No one wants to be buried beneath piles of game text. Long-windedness does not translate to character development or plot advancement. Listening to talking heads spew verbal vomit is the antithesis of fun.

Commandment the fourth: Thou shalt not pad...

Everyone wants to get his money's worth. And so game fans are quick to swallow the belief that more is better.

The truth is, an 80-hour game isn't inherently better than an 18-hour one. I'm not sure when it was that we gleefully signed up for pointless dungeon crawling in order to level up to meet a final boss or decided that wandering aimlessly through huge, wide-open fields was somehow better than traveling, say, along a path toward a clearly marked destination. I'll be damned, too, if I remember ever thinking it was a good idea to recycle enemies in order to extend "fun" another 10 hours.

We've come to accept filler and stuffing, greedily swallow it down as if it were worth consuming. And game companies have been more than happy to feed it to us.

Commandment the fifth: Give us a game, not an excuse to patch ...

Thank heaven for online gaming. Now, I can connect to people across the globe, many of whom will call me a f****** n***** f*****, a s***-eating c***, or an a**-rimming superf******. And boy am I ever glad!

But online gaming has a dark side. And anyone who's booted up say, Call of Duty 2 or Guitar Hero 2 for Xbox 360 has learned that life is a cruel f****** mistress. Game companies are now releasing titles with serious gameplay bugs and relying on patches to fix the problem after the fact. The worst aspects of PC gaming have been ported over to consoles, and hardware manufacturers—who are supposed to enforce standards on their individual platforms—have simply turned a blind eye to the problem.

> "On this day, you can consider me a modern-day Moses without the beard and certainly without the pretension"

Few things show more disdain for the consumer than games that ship needing to be patched. And any company that either releases such a game, or allows such a game to be released on its system, is worthy of nothing but scorn.

Commandment the sixth: Thou shalt not advertise ...

As Fight Night Round 3 taught us, it's that advertising is really, really good for the video game industry. It allows game companies to receive revenue from advertisers to fund the production of video games and then pass that savings on to the consumers—because, as you well remember, the ad-laden Fight Night Round 3 was released to the public at the reduced price of $59.95.

Advertising in games is inevitable. We're going to see more and more content bought and paid for by sponsors, and not one cent of those funds will ever go anywhere but into a game company's coffers. The big lie theory says you'll swallow the belief that somehow advertising makes a game "more real" or that somehow, magically, this will lead to games costing less. It ain't so.

Commandment the seventh: I am not a goddamned errand boy.... Do not make me fetch

Also, I am not a mule. Making me fetch things makes me angry.

If you can't think of anything better to do in your video game, make it so your characters have to dance a merry jig. Or bake a pie so delicious the king himself wouldn't think to spit out on the face of his court jester.

Commandment the eighth: Enough with the stealth, all right?

Frankly, I have a monkey's job. And the reason for this is simple: I am lazy and cannot abide doing "work." Nor do I enjoy, in no particular order, toil, labor, effort, or exertion.

Stealth sequences in games always annoy me. There's something about crouching, skulking, sneaking from hiding spot to hiding spot, avoiding detection, not making noise, and attempting to avoid tripping alarms that's not fun. Perhaps it might be because these things are dull. Or it might just be that they're the most boring things that anyone should never do within the context of a video game or real life. Either way.

Commandment the ninth: When in doubt, give us Nazis. Or zombies.

Also, Hitlerbots. Hitlerbots are a really great idea.

Commandment the tenth: Thou shalt never make me feel ritually unclean...

I am looking at you Rumble Roses XX and Dead or Alive Xtreme 2. And I haven't forgotten about you either, The Guy Game or Playboy: The Mansion. I'm hoping someday they'll invent water hot enough or soap strong enough to scald/scrape the dirt from my body.

"Excellent!" The New York Times "Kicks ASS" IGN.com

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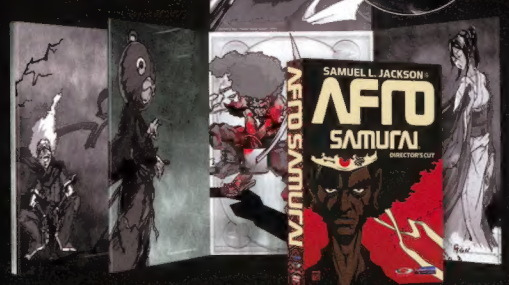

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